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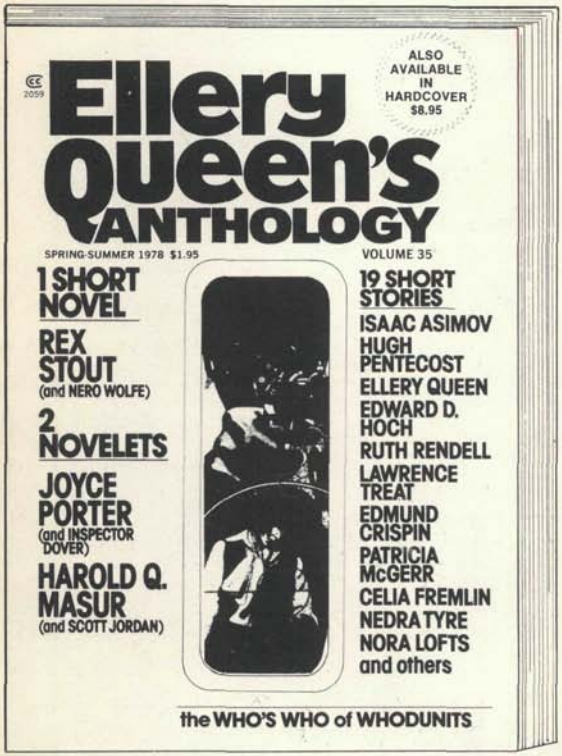

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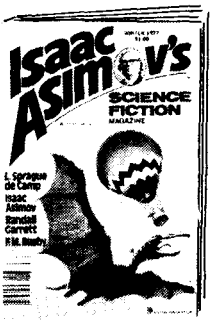

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ONE THING LEADS TO ANOTHER

by HAROLD Q. MASUR

It was an elegant building, tall and exclusive. The doorman, a resplendently caparisoned goliath, stood guard at the entrance like Leonidas defending the pass at Thermopylae. If you live in the Big Apple and can afford the protection, why not?

I paused alongside the revolving doors and stooped over to tighten a shoelace just as a taxi pulled up at the curb. Its occupant, apparently a paraplegic, struggled heroically to alight with the aid of aluminum crutches. As the doorman hastened across the sidewalk to assist, I ducked into the lobby, sprinted for the elevator, and jabbed the ninth-floor button.

Just before the door closed, I witnessed a miracle. The passenger suddenly straightened, tucked the crutches under his arm, saluted, and marched jauntily down the street. The doorman scratched his head in astonishment and then the elevator was lofting me skyward.

I found Lily Olson's door and rang the bell. It was opened by a spare, craggy-faced gent. "Mr. George Finney?" I asked.

"Who wants him?"

"This is for you, sir." I handed him a paper. "Summons and

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complaint. Finney versus Finney. Nonpayment of alimony and child support. Have a pleasant day."

There was a woman standing behind him, a striking blonde, thin-lipped now and furious. She ran to the house phone and as I walked back to the elevator I heard her chewing out the doorman, a venomous tirade in the lexicon of a mule-skinner.

On the way down I could not repress a smile of satisfaction. I had succeeded where two professional process servers had dismally failed to breach the building's security. Ordinarily, a lawyer does not serve his own papers. It's undignified. Nor do I generally handle cases of this kind. But Kate Finney had been recommended by an important client. She had a child from a previous marriage, legally adopted by Finney, and she desperately needed financial help.

She gave me the facts on the telephone. George Finney had walked out, left her and the child to shift for themselves, and had moved in with Lily Olson. She did not miss him, not on any emotional level. He drank excessively, worked sporadically, and could squeeze a dime until F.D.R.'s nose came out on the other side.

The elevator door opened on the lobby. The doorman was waiting. He towered over me, shoulders bunched, glowering and belligerent and spoiling for a fight. I handed him one of my cards.

"The name is Scott Jordan," I said. "Counselor and attorney-at-law. So if you decide to use your hands it won't cost me anything to sue the owners for aggravated assault. As a matter of fact, I'm perfectly willing to go a couple of rounds with you, but not at the moment. I'm due at my office for an appointment with the governor."

It gave him pause. The owner's wrath could be more catastrophic than Olson's abuse. While he was considering it, I slipped past him to the street and caught a cab back to the office.

Ten minutes later Danny Karr showed up. Danny, my new assistant, put some bills on my desk. He was grinning from ear to ear. "I returned the crutches, boss. Here's your change. How did you like my performance?"

"A bit gaudy," I said. "But the timing was fine and it worked."

"So how about a raise?"

"You had a raise last week."

"Inflation is killing me."

"You and everyone else. Learn to economize. Your time will come." And I was sure it would. Danny, only eight months out of

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law school, was young, eager, and bright. I moved some papers around on my desk. "On that environment case, where are those precedents I asked for?"

"We don't have the Minnesota Reports."

"Naturally. There are fifty states. Who has the shelf space? Use the Bar Association library."

"I'm not a member."

"I'm a member and you're my employee. Get over there tomorrow morning. Early, Counselor." He left and I phoned Kate Finney, asking her to stop by for trial preparation.

At four o'clock she arrived accompanied by Sara. The child had enormous eyes and an adult air of gravity. Kate, a slender, somewhat faded woman in her mid-thirties introduced us. "This is Mr. Jordan, Sara. He's my lawyer."

"I don't like lawyers," Sara said.

"Why don't you like lawyers?" I asked.

"George says they're not honest. He says if you don't watch out, they'll steal you blind."

Her mother reprimanded her sharply. "Sara! Apologize at once."

"Okay," she said, not changing her opinion. "I apologize."

Keeping a straight face, I buzzed for Danny Karr. "Danny," I said, "this young lady is Sara Finney. Entertain her in your office while I talk to her mother."

Sara looked him over. "Are you a lawyer too?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She handed her small plastic purse to her mother. "Then you'd better hold this for me."

Danny rolled his eyes, beckoned, and she followed him out. Kate gestured helplessly. "I don't know what to do with that child."

"She'll grow out of it. Is George attached to her?"

"Hah! There is no room in George's emotional equipment for anyone but George. His ego is exceeded only by his selfishness and his penury. The man is incapable of sharing."

"You mentioned that he's a writer."

"Well, he's sold several short stories, but he drinks too much and he can't discipline himself to a full-time schedule."

"You said he has an independent income."

"Yes. From a trust fund administered by an old fossil of a lawyer he inherited from his parents."

"We'll levy an attachment against it."

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She smiled. "I'd like to see his face."

"Tell me about Lily Olson."

"He met her through his literary agent, a man named Arnold Procter. She's a writer too, and fairly successful. She writes those romantic Gothic novels. After our last fight George went to live with her. Maybe she's more tolerant than I, or less sensitive." She paused and looked thoughtful. "I—er—have a confession to make." When I said nothing, she continued. "Last week a letter came for George from the editor of a magazine in Chicago. They used to correspond with each other and I guess he didn't know George had moved out. Anyway, I steamed it open. He said he liked the new story Procter had submitted and he would be sending a check to the agent at the end of the month."

"We'll get a court order restraining Procter from turning the money over to George until the determination of your case against him. There's really no way you can lose."

I spent some time preparing her for the court hearing and then I buzzed for Danny Karr. Sara was holding his hand and apparently had changed her mind about lawyers. He accompanied Kate and Sara to the elevator and then came back, smiling.

I said, "Let's see how good you are, Danny." I told him to get the form book and to prepare a restraining order against Arnold Procter. "Complete the papers and serve them before you go home this evening."

Danny Karr spent the next morning at the Bar Association library. He checked into the office at noon and I saw at once that he was not himself. He seemed dreamy-eyed, dismantled. I had to snap my fingers to get his attention.

"Have you been smoking something, Counselor?" I asked.

He blinked and shook his head.

"You're in a trance, moonstruck. What gives?"

"I—I think I'm in love."

I did a double-take. "With little Sara Finney, for God's sake?"

"No, sir." He smiled foolishly. "With Amy."

"And who, pray, is Amy?"

He sighed. "Amy is a walking poem, a rainbow, a—"

"Whoa, boy! Settle down. Get your head together. Where did you meet this enchantress?"

"In Arnold Procter's office."

"Well, now, George Finney met a female in Procter's office and

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it changed his whole way of life. Is Amy a writer too?"

He shook his head. "She works for him. She's his secretary."

"Are you telling me you walked in there to serve some legal papers and beheld this vision and bingo, you were hooked, just like that?"

"Almost, Mr. Jordan. You see, Procter was out when I got there. Amy said he'd be back in fifteen minutes. So I waited. And we talked. I liked her. I asked her to have dinner with me last night and she said yes. So we went out and then I took her home and we sat up and talked until three o'clock this morning."

"You kissed her good night?"

"Uh-huh."

"And bells began to ring?"

He nodded, looking rhapsodic.

"I hope you didn't forget to serve that restraining order on her boss."

"I didn't forget. Business before pleasure."

"An excellent maxim, Danny. Never lose sight of it while you're employed in this office. Now go back to the library and finish your research."

My phone rang and Kate Finney was on the line. "Mr. Jordan," she said, sounding tense and subdued, "there's a policeman here. He says George is dead. He wants me to come to the morgue to identify the body."

"Let me talk to him." She put him on and I said, "I'm the lady's lawyer, officer. What happened?"

"Harbor Patrol fished a floater out of the East River early this morning. We got this address from his driver's license. They need the widow downtown for identification."

I spoke to Kate again. I told her to leave Sara with one of the neighbors and to cooperate. I promised to use my contacts at the Police Department for additional information.

My principal contact was Detective Lieutenant John Nola, Homicide, dark, lean, a resourceful and subtly intuitive cop. He sat behind his desk, a thin Dutch cigar smoking itself between his teeth, eyes unblinking, while I explained my connection with the deceased.

"Anything suspicious?" I asked finally.

"All we have now is that he was stoned. There was enough alcohol in his blood to float a rowboat."

"Then it could have been accident."

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"Or someone helped him over the edge. You know anything about his financial status?"

"He had an income from a trust fund."

"Who inherits?"

"The widow, probably."

He lifted an eyebrow. "And he'd strayed from the reservation, was living with another woman? He was tight and behind in his alimony?"

"No, Lieutenant. That's a bad hand. Mrs. Finney is not the type."

The eyebrow moved higher. "There are types of murderers, Counselor? Neatly pegged in categories? Make us a list, please. We can use it." He shook his head. "Tell me about the Olson woman."

I gave him what I had. He stood abruptly. "Let's check her out."

The taxpayers provided transport. At Lily Olson's building the same doorman recognized me and blocked our way. "No, you don't," he growled. "Not this time, buster. You're a cute one all right. You almost cost me my job. Now turn around and march, both of you."

But his truculence quickly evaporated at the sight of Nola's shield and was replaced by a lumpy smile of apology. He stepped aside. Nola pointed at the house phone. "Don't use that thing."

"Whatever you say, Lieutenant."

Lily Olson answered the doorbell. Nola identified himself. "And this one?" she demanded, indicating me with a thumb.

"His name is Jordan. He's a lawyer."

"A lawyer!" She snorted. "That explains the trickery. Do you know what he did, Lieutenant? He gained access to this building by subterfuge and served some legal papers on a guest of mine. Isn't there a law against that—criminal trespass or something?"

"I'll look it up," Nola said. "In the meantime I need some information. I understand you had a house guest, a Mr. George Finney."

"I still do."

"Any idea where he is at the moment?"

"No, I don't. He went for a walk the day before yesterday and hasn't returned."

"You're not concerned about his whereabouts?"

She shrugged. "George is a grown man. But he has a problem—drinking. He probably stopped off at a bar and got plastered.

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He knows how I feel about that, so he probably took a room somewhere to dry out. It wouldn't be the first time. Why are you asking these questions?"

"George Finney is dead."

She gasped. "Oh, no. How—how did it happen?"

"His body was found in the East River early this morning."

"Suicide?"

"We doubt it."

"Had he been drinking?"

"Heavily."

"Then it must have been an accident."

"From the amount of alcohol in Finney's blood we don't see how he could have reached the river under his own power."

"He liked to walk along the river. And he generally carried a flask in his pocket. Surely you don't suspect foul play."

"It's a possibility we have to explore. Admittedly, he could have been the victim of a random mugging, or something more deliberate. Did Finney have any enemies?"

"Everyone liked George."

"Including his wife?"

"There are always exceptions. They fought a great deal."

"And he came to you for comfort?"

"Why not? Life is short."

"It is indeed. We'd like to look at his papers, his correspondence, anything he kept here."

"Do you have a warrant?"

"You invited us in."

"I'm inviting you out."

"It's too late, Miss Olson. Finney is dead. We don't need a warrant to examine his property."

"I think you do. This is my apartment. Ask your lawyer friend here."

He shook his head. "One telephone call and I can have a warrant here within the hour."

She frowned and bit her lip. She debated with herself and finally gestured ungraciously. "Go ahead."

In the bedroom closet Finney's clothes yielded nothing. There was a sunlit workroom at the end of the corridor. It contained a filing cabinet, a shelf of reference books, and a large desk with an electric typewriter. A bridge table in the corner held Finney's portable and an untidy pile of papers. Nola gathered them into a

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bundle and we started to leave.

"How about his clothes?" Lily Olson called.

"Give them to the Salvation Army," I said and followed Nola out to the elevator and down to the street.

We parted. He went back to the precinct and I returned to my office. My secretary had left for the day. Danny Karr was still at the Bar Association library. I was alone, correcting syntax on an appeals brief when I heard someone moving around in the outer office. I got up and walked to the door for a look.

A young girl smiled at me. "I'm supposed to meet Mr. Karr here at six," she said. "I'm Amy Barth."

She was neither a rainbow nor a walking poem, but I could easily understand how the sturdy figure and the large eyes and the gamine grin could turn Danny Karr into a marshmallow.

I smiled back. "How do you do, Amy. I'm Danny's boss. He should be back at any moment. You can wait for him in my office, unless you'd prefer to sit out here and read the *Law Journal*."

"Oh, no," she said. She perched herself on the red-leather chair, bouncing restlessly. "Danny says you're probably the smartest lawyer in New York."

"Danny will be sadly disillusioned after he's been around for a while. Is there something wrong with that chair?"

She giggled. "Oh, no," she said, "the chair is fine. It's just that I'm in very high spirits. I work for a literary agency and such exciting things have been happening this week."

"For example?"

"We're handling a new book by Lily Olson. Do you know her work? This one is different than anything she's ever written. It's a political thriller called *The Machiavelli Project*. It's about a millionaire Vice-President who conspires to get rid of the President and take over the White House."

"Sounds interesting," I said.

"It's a real cliffhanger. Readers won't be able to put it down. Mr. Procter got an enormous advance from the hardcover publisher and last Wednesday the paperback rights sold for one million dollars. Three book clubs are taking it and all the major movie companies are bidding for the screen rights. Some of Hollywood's biggest stars have called." She looked awe-struck and said in a hushed voice, "I think I heard Gregory Peck's voice on the phone this morning. I almost fainted."

"Quite a blockbuster," I said.

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"Mr. Procter never had one like this before."

Danny arrived. He saw Amy and his expression turned sappy. They smiled at each other. He approached and placed a sheaf of yellow legal cap on my desk. "Here are my notes on the Minnesota Reports."

"No, Danny," I said. "That's not the way to do it. Who can translate your hieroglyphics? Type them out. Neatly."

He looked stricken. "Now?"

"Tomorrow morning will do."

"Yes, sir," he said gratefully and propelled Amy out of the office before I could change my mind.

I sat back and thought about Lily Olson's new novel. Perhaps it was time for me to seek out a few writers as clients. The paperback revolution and the money guarantees made the prospect extremely attractive. I glanced at my watch and dialed Kate Finney's number.

"It was a dreadful ordeal," she told me. "I could hardly recognize George."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"Would you take care of the funeral arrangements?"

"Of course."

"And George's estate too?"

"If you wish."

"Will the court hearing be postponed?"

"I'll call the clerk and explain the situation."

After we broke the connection, I locked the office and headed across town to see Nola. He seldom punched a clock when working on a case. He had been studying Finney's papers. I told him about Lily Olson's successful book.

He whistled. "At least two million in the till so far. I guess I'm in the wrong business."

"Finney's papers tell you anything?"

He shook his head. "Look for yourself."

I pulled up a chair and started reading. There was some correspondence from the lawyer handling Finney's trust fund, signed in a shaky hand; a note from a former army friend now living in Pocatello, Idaho; and a few letters from Kate complaining about support and threatening legal action. Finney's notebooks interested me. And so did a letter from Arnold Procter expressing mild interest in the outline for a prospective novel titled *The Long Night*. The agent had reservations about Finney's ability to

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complete a full-length work. He doubted that any publisher would commit himself to an advance. As an alternative, he suggested finding a collaborator.

I was distracted by the ringing of Nola's phone. He spoke briefly and I sensed his eyes watching me as I looked up. He cradled the handset.

"The name Daniel Karr mean anything to you, Counselor?"

"Yes. He's my assistant."

"He's in the Emergency Room at Manhattan General."

I sat erect. "What happened?"

"Automobile accident. Hit-and-run. Compound fracture of the right leg, plus assorted contusions and abrasions. He whispered your name several times before they put him under in order to set the bone."

I was on my feet and moving. Nola came after me. I said, "There was a girl with him."

"Amy Barth. Same accident."

"Hurt badly?"

"She's dead."

Bile leaped into my throat. I took the stairs two at a time. In the street I started to flag a cab, but Nola shouldered me into a police car and snapped instructions at the driver. The siren opened traffic like a carving knife.

We found Danny Karr propped up in bed, his face drawn and white, right leg supported in traction, head in bandages, plaster criss-crossing a cheek. He said in a half-drugged voice, "They won't tell me about Amy, boss. Can you find out how she is?"

"Later, Danny. How did it happen?"

"Amy wanted to go home first and freshen up before dinner. It's a brownstone on West 26th. We came out and started to cross the street. I heard some lunatic gun his engine and I started to turn, but it was too late. He was right on top of us. And then I felt the impact and I guess I passed out. The next thing I knew I was in an ambulance. They brought me here. Did anything happen to Amy?"

I didn't have the heart to tell him. Not yet, anyway. I asked him if there was anything he needed, anything I could do, perhaps notify his parents. They were retired and living in Florida and he didn't want to worry them.

Amy's people, however, would have to be notified. I had no information for Nola except that she worked for Arnold Procter.

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"Then that's the man we'll have to see," he said. "Let's go."

The telephone directory supplied his home address in the exclusive Beekman Place area. A townhouse, no less. Procter was a man who did not believe in economizing.

Nola banged the knocker and a man opened the door. My jaw fell. Spare and craggy-faced, he stared back. Lazarus rising from the grave. The same man I'd seen in Lily Olson's apartment.

"Finney?" I said on a rising inflection.

"No, sir. The name is Procter—Arnold Procter."

"But you're the man I served with the summons."

"You made an unwarranted assumption, sir. I was visiting Miss Olson on business. You simply handed me that paper and left. What is it now? What do you want?"

"He's with me," Nola said, again presenting his credentials and identifying himself. "His name is Jordan."

"Scott Jordan? The lawyer?" Procter made a face. "I know the name. He dispatched one of his acolytes to my office yesterday with some kind of restraining order. A barrator, Lieutenant, this man is a compulsive barrator."

Nola glanced at me.

"Someone who practices barratry," I explained. "The excessive instigation and promotion of lawsuits."

He turned back to Procter. "You have an employee named Amy Barth?"

"I do."

"I have some sad news. She was struck by an automobile early this evening and killed."

"What?" He stared. "Oh, my God! That lovely child." He shook his head. "It doesn't seem possible. Come in, please." In the living room, his face grim, he shook a stern finger at Nola. "Those damned drunken drivers! Why do you grant them licenses to assassinate pedestrians? Amy Barth. What a dreadful waste!"

"Can you tell us how to reach her family?"

"I know only that she comes from the Midwest. Wichita, I believe. They gravitate here from the provinces, all the bright and eager youngsters, seeking adventure and opportunity." He gestured. "And Jordan? Why is Jordan interested? Because of the accident? Is he chasing ambulances?"

"Jordan's assistant was injured in the same accident."

"The young man should be warned, Lieutenant. He's courting eventual disbarment with his present affiliation."

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And Mr. Arnold Procter, I thought, was courting a fat lip.

Nola said, "How long had the girl been working for you?"

"About a month."

"Did she ever discuss her personal affairs?"

"I do not encourage intimacies. We're under constant pressure at the agency. I imagine you could find the necessary information at the girl's apartment." He glanced at his watch. "I really don't have much time, Lieutenant. I'm due at an important meeting."

"Sorry. You'll have to resign yourself to being late."

Procter lifted his chin superciliously. "This city is suffering from a serious fiscal crisis. I understand we've been compelled to reduce the number of law-enforcement officers. Shouldn't you be out catching crooks?"

"That's exactly what he's doing right at this moment," I said.

His head swiveled. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about embezzlement, Procter. I'm talking about murder. Where do you keep your car?"

"What car?"

"The car you parked near Amy's apartment early this evening, waiting for her to come out so you could aim it and step on the gas and put her away. My assistant was with her at the time, so he too was expendable. But it was Amy who caught the full impact."

"*Me?*" He flattened a palm against his chest. "Are you saying I killed Amy? I don't even own a car."

"Then you rented one. They'll check the rental agencies, Procter. Think about it. Did you return a car with a smashed headlight or a dented fender? Wiped clean of fingerprints?"

"Why in God's name would I want to hurt that girl?"

"Because she knew too much," I said. "She knew about all the money involved in Lily Olson's new book. Almost two million dollars or more. The first time your agency ever hit the jackpot. It might never happen again, either to you or to Lily Olson. Or to George Finney who conceived the idea and developed the plot and was entitled to half of the proceeds."

"Who says so?"

"Finney's notebooks. We have them in his own handwriting, elaborating on the same theme that appears in Olson's book, *The Machiavelli Project.* And a letter you wrote suggesting that he collaborate with some other writer. You put him in touch with Lily Olson. Those papers should have been destroyed, Procter, only the

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lieutenant showed up unexpectedly and seized them before you had a chance."

"I wrote him a letter, yes. But it referred to a different project."

"It referred to an outline called *The Long Night.* And Olson's book may even have been submitted under that title. Because at that time nobody anticipated this windfall. Shall we call the publishers and ask if they were involved in a change of title?"

It started a vein throbbing in his temple.

I said, "Finney's name had no currency in the publishing world. So he willingly agreed to let Olson appear as the sole author. As a matter of fact, he insisted on it. Because if his wife learned about any new source of income, she had a legal right to demand an increase in alimony. He wanted to avoid that. He hoped to squirrel the money away, so his selfishness played into your hands.

"But then lightning struck. You found yourself in possession of a blockbuster worth millions. Greed obliterated your ethics. You had an idea. You went to Lily Olson and sounded her out. You told her she had written the book, slaved over it for months, bled her talent. Why split with Finney? You made her a proposition. If Finney could be eliminated, with no risk to her, would she split his share with you. And she was receptive. So you worked it out. They celebrated their success and she got him drunk. Then you coaxed him into a car and he kept lapping it up while you drove to an appropriate spot along the river. You got him out, stoned and helpless, and gave him a push."

His mouth was open, breathing harshly, his face moist.

"It never ends," I said. "One thing leads to another. I sent my assistant to your office and he met Amy Barth and they became friends. That posed an instant threat. Because Amy knew about the collaboration. And she could kick over the pail by mentioning it. So she had to be silenced without delay and you took care of it. Who else knew where she lived? Who else had a motive? You, Procter, only you.

"You're finished, mister. They'll put it all together and when they start leaning on Lily Olson she'll come apart, trying to clear her own skirts. You haven't a prayer."

He sank into a chair and covered his face. Nola reached for the telephone and I heard him telling someone to pick up the Olson woman. I looked at Procter. All those snide comments about lawyers. And five will get you twenty, in about two minutes he'd be yelling his head off for one.

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a NEW short story by

WILLIAM BANKIER

The fascinating tale of Carter Varley, an English mystery-story writer, and what happened after he named one of his characters William Stoke. Not that Varley had no premonition: the hint of danger "caught him in the chest and buzzed there for seconds, gradually fading away and leaving him feeling cold" . . .

A HINT OF DANGER

by *WILLIAM BANKIER*

Carter Varley was accustomed to writing mystery stories, having them published, and then hearing no more about them. His friends seldom read one or, if they did, they kept silent about it. Varley considered this to be a kind of passive hostility motivated by envy. As for strangers—the anonymous public who were exposed to his work in various magazines—he supposed they turned the pages, were amused or not, and then went about the business of their lives.

But now, on this drafty November morning with a gray rain sweeping across Wimbledon Common and spattering against the window beside Varley's desk, here was an astonishing letter from America. It had been forwarded to him by the editor of a magazine published in New York, but the postmark was Chattanooga, Tennessee.

"Imagine my surprise," the letter began, "when I read your story entitled 'Forgotten, Not Gone' and discovered it was about me!" The writer went on to identify himself as William Stoke (indeed the name Varley had invented for the villain in his story) and to say that, furthermore, he was a practicing lawyer. This compounded the coincidence almost beyond belief because Varley's fictional Stoke had been a lawyer, too.

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With an ethereal feeling Varley cranked paper into his machine and typed an answer. He apologized for any embarrassment and expressed his amazement at the sort of coincidence that happens in real life, too bizarre ever to be written into a story. Varley thanked Stoke for his letter and then, uncharacteristically, invited the American to call if ever he should be in London.

The rain stopped in early afternoon. Varley went out for a walk in the High Street, paid an outrageous price at the grocer's for some salad ingredients, posted his letter to America, and then went to The Dog and Fox for a pint.

Tucked away in a corner, his portly torso wedged into a leather armchair, the mug of brown ale glowing on polished oak easily within reach, Varley stared at the hissing glow of the gas fire and worried about what he had done. He did not want people dropping in on him, not friends, not strangers, certainly not an aggressive American who would think he had a claim on Varley simply because his name had fallen into the author's mind by sheer happenstance.

Varley drank the ale, making up his mind to have another. And perhaps a couple of those Scotch Eggs. The crusty, breaded eggs improved his mood and so did the second pint. He was fretting for nothing. Stoke had written because he was surprised and pleased to see his name in print. Varley's reply was no more than proper, and the invitation was the sort of formality that nobody takes seriously. Chattanooga was a long way from London—nothing more would ever come of it.

Christmas arrived and Varley was forced to recognize that he had not got over the death of his wife two years ago. By burrowing like a mole into mountains of work, he could deceive himself for months at a time into thinking he was self-sufficient and secure. But when he lifted his head at the end of the year he encountered all kinds of ferocious reminders—the scent of oranges, frost in his nostrils on night walks, lights on trees seen through curtained windows, and at his doorway three children singing a carol.

Varley gave them 50 pence and sent them away, then turned out all his lights and sat shivering in the dark, drinking Scotch whiskey and facing the past like a martyr submitting to the fire. He saw the old chapel with himself in his twenties, dressed in cassock and surplice on the tenor side of the chancel, holding his

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hymnbook high and looking across it at Beatrice in the front row of the altos. Midnight service on Christmas Eve.

These had been the good years, the early days of his life with Beatrice. Time eroded the relationship until it became something no longer worth preserving. But now that he was going it alone, Varley's mind would only deliver up memories of sweet events.

The year finally turned and delivered a cold January followed by a gray wet February, both of which were improvements on the festive season as far as Carter Varley was concerned. Then came a surprisingly sunny March, milder than the month had been in a decade. These were ideal working days and he got his head down and tunneled busily into the material of his experience.

Then the telephone rang.

Varley jumped, barking his knee on the desk and spilling milky coffee on the cherrywood surface. Leaving a paper napkin to absorb the overflow, he limped out of the study and into the bedroom, balancing the clamor of the bell with short angry responses.

"Yes. All right. Hang on."

The voice on the line was, to Varley's ear, almost stage-American. "Hello, this is Mr. Billy Stoke speaking. Is that Mr. Carter Varley?"

"Yes, it is." Said with heart beginning to pound.

"I hope I'm not interrupting your work but we got into London last night and I figured that after the very kind invitation in your letter I had to call and say hello."

"Yes, rather. Very glad you did."

Stoke laughed in a boyish way. "I don't suppose you get telephoned very often by a character in one of your stories."

A few generalities were exchanged during which Stoke mentioned the name Irene. He was not traveling alone and, for some reason, this eased Varley's anxiety. Then the American said, "I know you writers have a schedule to stick to, but I was hoping Irene and I might persuade you to come to London and have a meal with us."

Varley had not ventured beyond the High Street in months. London meant the train to Waterloo, crowds, taxis, a strange hotel lobby. "Yes, very nice. It's a question of time. Perhaps a day next week."

"Afraid we're only in London for a couple of days. We've rented a car and we plan to drive along the south coast."

A momentary silence. Then Varley was astonished to hear him-

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self saying, "Then come out here for dinner. Yes, by all means, come this evening."

The American's pleasure at the invitation was so gratifying that Varley found himself going further. It was as if some hospitable impulse buried long ago had been uncovered. "Look here," he said, "why don't you check out of the hotel? I have a perfectly good guest room here."

That was the end of writing for the day. Varley set aside his current manuscript, took a fresh sheet of paper, and drafted a menu for dinner. Under it he listed the items he would have to buy at the shops, including wine and beer and a bottle of cognac.

By six o'clock the roast of beef, surrounded by potatoes, carrots, and onions, was in the oven, filling the house with its appetizing aroma. A litre of Italian red wine was uncorked and resting on the Jacobean sideboard. Varley admired the table setting—gleaming silver, polished plates, folded linen, four tall candles in antique brass sticks. A long time since he had drawn the oak table away from the wall and raised the drop leaves.

He was placing a few additional lumps of smokeless coal on the open fire when he heard the swing of the iron gate followed by the scrape of footsteps outside the front door. Varley paused at the hall mirror to adjust the knot in his tie and smooth the edges of his graying hair. There was color in his face for the first time in a year and his eyes were clear and alert.

William Stoke and Irene from Chattanooga, Tennessee turned out to be everything Varley could have hoped for and nothing he might have feared. For one thing, they were not dressed in what he considered to be the style of children—no turtleneck sweaters, no peaked caps, no blazers with crests on them. Stoke, tall and heavyset, deeply tanned and handsome, ten years younger than Varley's half century, was wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and modest tie. His shoes had laces and were polished black. Too good to be true.

Irene Stoke could not have been older than 30. She had a stage beauty, regular features made up immaculately, hair like burnished copper worn in one thick braid over her shoulder, and classic eyes of penetrating green.

They sat with drinks in upholstered chairs drawn close to the fire while rain came out of the darkness and rattled on the windows. Billy Stoke said, "Always wanted to see England but kept putting it off. It was that nice letter of yours that did it."

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"What a charming room you've given us," Irene said. She smiled and then raised her eyes to gaze at the rough beams set in the ceiling over 200 years ago. "I love this house."

The dinner table was small and brought the three of them close together in an intimate circle. Stoke's massive shoulders leaned in and overshadowed the other two and as they turned their heads during conversation they looked into each other's eyes at close range, saw reflected candlelight, and something else they could not identify.

"These people are strangers," Varley said to himself in amazement, wondering how they could be so simpatico.

A possible explanation sprang into his mind over coffee when the huge wine bottle was empty and he was pouring cognac. What if they were professionals? It was a preposterous premise and had he not been half drunk he would have buried it away. But he *was* nicely drunk, happily drunk for the first time in years, so he said, "I've just had a fascinating idea. You're going to laugh."

"What is it?"

"It's more than likely that you aren't really the William Stokes at all. You are American adventurers, a team of con artists if you like, and you wrote that letter simply to gain access to my house, my life, my confidence." Varley spread his arms to encompass the scene. "Done it rather well, too, I should say."

Was he mistaken or did a frown pass between Stoke and his wife? It might have been a trick of the candlelight. The American said, "But what about my letterhead? It identifies me as William Stoke, Attorney at Law, of Chattanooga, Tennessee. And that happens to be who I am."

"Easiest job in the world to have a fake letterhead printed up. First thing you'd do on a scheme like this." Why was he pressing the idea? It might be taken as uncommonly rude unless his guests accepted it as banter. And how could they do that when Varley himself was not sure whether he was serious or not?

But Stoke did laugh. "The author's mind at work," he said. "I guess you've got to see a twist in everything. But why would we go to all this trouble? What's our motive?"

"That's obvious," Varley said. "Financial gain. You get me on good terms, find out where I keep my assets, perhaps persuade me to draw out some money or write a large check. Then you vanish, discarding the false identity as you go."

Had anyone spoken at that moment, Varley might not have felt

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the hint of danger. But there was silence and he did feel it, a deep thrum like the clong when a tuning fork is struck. It caught him in the chest and buzzed there for seconds, gradually fading away and leaving him feeling cold. He glanced at Stoke, looking for confirmation of the threat, but the big man was tipping back his cognac, lowering the glass and shaking his head, his mouth pursed with amusement.

They sat up till midnight, talking by the fire. The Americans shared the telling of stories about motor trips to New Orleans, to Atlanta, even as far away as California. These distances seemed interstellar to the Englishman who considered the 50 miles to Brighton a long haul.

The visitors acted like a drug on Varley and he found himself opening up about his life, a thing he seldom did. Perhaps the lawyer's subtle questioning led him—he only realized this later; but at the time he rambled on about his solitary state in the world now that he was a widower. No children, no relatives living anywhere; he was a man who could fall off the edge of the earth and never be missed.

"How did your wife. . . ?" Irene began.

Stoke cleared his throat but Varley said, "No, it's all right. An accident. She struck her head while bathing and drowned."

Hours later, waking in darkness, Varley sensed movement on the stairs outside his bedroom door. He got up, stepped into slippers, pulled on a robe, and went out quietly onto the landing. He had left the bathroom light burning for his guests' convenience. It illuminated the stairs to the angle where they turned five steps below. Silence. But a fragrance in the air—a woman's scent. It was some time since Varley had experienced this sensation in his house late at night.

He crept down the stairs into a chilly hallway, found the front door standing open, and passed through it onto the flagstone entrance to the narrow garden running along that side of the cottage. Irene Stoke was standing halfway down the path dressed in a long robe. Her braid was undone, the hair brushed out to shoulder width and halfway down her back. He approached her and they stood together in silence. Then she said, "I couldn't sleep. I'm sorry."

"It's all right."

The moon was full. Its pale illumination flooded the brick wall beside them almost like stage lighting. Not yet in leaf, the dor-

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mant vine creeping over the wall seemed a dead thing. Varley could smell moist earth and a flood of ozone from the nearby forest. It occurred to him that he ought to spend a couple of hours outside on every night as fine as this one.

Now the woman put a hand on his shoulder in the sort of companionable contact practiced by old friends. She leaned forward and kissed him, a touch as cool and fragrant as if she had brushed his cheek with a rose.

"Oughtn't to do that," Varley said.

She turned her head and looked up at the silhouette of tiled roof and chimneypots with the white, pocked globe of the moon suspended over it. He saw her mouth form a self-deprecating smile as she said with a note of finality, "I love this house."

After breakfast Varley found himself alone with William Stoke. Irene had insisted on going around to the shops to bring back some food. Stoke toyed with his third cup of coffee. "I guess Irene made a nuisance of herself last night," he said. "Sorry about that."

Having done nothing, Varley felt guilty. "No trouble at all. Difficult to sleep in strange surroundings."

But the American was intent on saying more. "I never expected to tell you this bit of background. But then, I never thought I'd be spending the night in your home." He went on to explain that this was not a holiday trip. The Stokes were preparing to move to England—under some duress. It seemed Irene had been stealing from department stores for years. She had been in police hands more than once and it had reached the point where Stoke's legal influence was wearing thin. They were talking about putting her away.

"Kleptomania," Varley said. "Surely she ought to be seeing a psychiatrist."

"We've tried that. Some people don't respond very well to analysis. Irene is one of them." The American gave his host a troubled smile. "No, I think the only answer is a complete change of scene. Perhaps a small town, a village even, where there's less opportunity for her."

"But how will you practice law?"

"Fortunately we've done well enough. Money is no problem."

The front door closed and Irene came through into the kitchen depositing a laden shopping basket on the counter. She sensed the atmosphere in the room. "My husband has been talking, has he?"

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Her voice was ultracheerful. "That's Billy's big problem. He never knows when to shut up." Briskly she began unloading the basket.

It was William Stoke's suggestion that they get into the rented sedan and drive down to the south coast. The weather was pleasant enough, the warmest March day on record. As they set out, Stoke said, "We may even see a village we might like to settle in." The truth was now in the open, though nothing more was said.

They took the Brighton road, then bore east through Sussex, touching the coast at Hastings where they got out of the car and walked along the beach for half a mile. Then on past Winchelsea, New Romney, Dymchurch, and Hythe, and thence along the cliffs toward Folkestone and Dover.

"Not too keen on these areas ahead," Stoke said. "Too metropolitan."

"Sandgate is a nice little place," Varley suggested.

Then Irene Stoke said in a bitter tone, "Or we could pitch a tent in a field. Or how about a small cabin, of clay and wattles made."

Varley realized how serious Stoke was when the man stopped by a real-estate office and went in to find out what was for sale and for how much. Irene refused to accompany him, so Varley waited with her in the car. They were silent for a few minutes. From his place in the back seat he had a view of her shoulders and the shiny back of her head, the dark hair tightly braided. The interior of the car smelled of leather and paint. Finally Irene turned around and said brightly, "He's taken you in completely."

"How do you mean?"

"You believe he's what he says he is."

"I'm still not with you."

She closed her eyes while she said, "You were perceptive last night. Don't be dull now." She opened her eyes and stared at him. "Don't you see? Your writer's instinct was correct. He is *not* William Stoke. I am not his wife. This *is* a confidence trick to relieve you of a lot of money."

"But last night I was only joking." As he said this, he remembered his uncertainty at the time as to whether he was joking or not. And he recalled the hint of danger that came to him from somewhere across the table.

"Joke or not, you had it right. Ted—that's his real name—got this idea and he's been crafty enough to follow it through. It was all as you said, even to having the letterhead printed."

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Carter Varley felt the sting behind his eyes, called it pure anger, but was not ready to admit he could weep with disappointment at this betrayal. "Then I'll just have a word with your Ted when he comes back. What's this house hunt, then? Part of the window dressing?"

"Yes. He lives a part one hundred percent."

"But why the story about your kleptomania? Is that true?"

"Of course not. It's all designed to lull you, to make you feel sorry for us." She reached across the seatback and took Varley's hand. "But be careful. Don't say anything to let him know I've told you. He's a psychopath and you'd be in real danger. Just watch him and say nothing."

"Why are you telling me this? It can't be in your interest."

"No. But I think you're a good man." She squeezed his hand and let it go. "Protect yourself and I'll take Ted away tomorrow."

The man who said he was William Stoke came back from the real-estate agent's office with a handful of data sheets on homes for sale. These were passed around and discussed while he drove on. After half an hour the road climbed to a headland with a vast ocean horizon spread out below a high chalk cliff.

"Now there's a view," Stoke said, pulling the car onto a grassy verge. "How'd you like to live with that outside your bedroom window?"

Irene was the first one out of the car, running to the very lip of the cliff where she stood with fists on hips, owning everything the eye could see.

"Not too close," Stoke called. "It's a lovely fall, but the last couple of feet are murder."

They studied the view from every direction and began to feel the spank of sun and wind on their cheeks. Then Irene noticed a coffee wagon parked far down the slope by the edge of the highway where a cluster of construction huts bordered a building site.

"That's what we need," she said. "Hot coffee."

Varley insisted on going to get three cups. As he walked down the hill, he wondered what he ought to do about the dangerous situation he was in. Morally, he should call the police. If the pseudo-Stoke character was as bad as Irene said he was, then he deserved to be locked up. But it would be a tricky procedure to approach a policeman. No crime had been committed. There would be no reason to hold him. But once the American knew Varley had become suspicious, he might be capable of anything.

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Trudging back up the slope with three coffee cartons in a perforated tray, Varley decided to keep silent and ease the strangers out of his house tomorrow. Once alone, he could consider putting the police on their track.

He was crossing the low mound that prevented a person farther down the hill from seeing anyone on the promontory when he heard Irene calling and saw the struggle taking place near the edge of the cliff. Stoke had Irene by the arms but she was fighting hard, out of her shoes, tearing one arm loose and swinging the free hand in a wide arc against the side of his head. It looked like a slap but it was more; she was holding a rock in that hand. Stoke's knees buckled and he sank to the grass.

"He knows that you know," she gasped as Varley ran up and set the coffee aside.

"You told him?"

"He suspected. He hurt me." She showed crimson marks on a pale arm. "I had to tell him."

Carter Varley knelt to look at the ugly wound on the man's head. He was moaning, barely conscious. "You could have killed him."

"I had to act. He was going to throw you over the cliff as soon as you got back." Irene reached out to turn Varley's head so that his eyes met hers. They were wide with shock. "I told you, he's mad."

When Stoke tried to raise his head, Varley whispered, "What do we do?"

"We've got to finish him. No, don't think about it. If he comes round, he'll go crazy. We'll never be able to handle him. If we run away, he'll come back to the house. If you call the police, he'll stay out of sight, but you'll never be safe. Believe me, I know him."

"But what—?"

"Over the edge. Quickly. We'll both say he fell. The head wound will be part of the fall."

"I can't do that."

But Irene had Stoke by the arm, his torso half off the ground. She was surprisingly strong. "Take my word," she gasped. "He deserves to die. The things he's done to so many people. You'll be serving justice."

Stoke's bloodied head was coming up, the whites of his eyes showing, his mouth hanging open. It was a terrifying sight and

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suddenly Varley wanted an end to it. His heart pounding, he seized the other arm and, together, he and Irene walked the man to the cliff edge. Two steps away they let him go and he tottered forward, stepped crazily into space, and was gone.

The first thing was to wipe away a few traces of blood from the grass, the next to drive to the nearest town for the police. It took some time but by sundown the accident was confirmed, William Stoke was well and truly dead, and Carter Varley was at the wheel of the car driving home.

Irene turned on the radio to a commercial music station. This seemed wrong, so he snapped it off.

"Well!" she said petulantly.

Something else was wrong. "His papers all tallied with the identification of William Stoke from Chattanooga," Varley said. "Driver's license, social security card, and so on. If he wasn't Stoke, and this was a temporary con game, why had he gone to all that trouble?"

"That's easy. Because he *was* William Stoke. Everything he told you was true. I'm the one who has been lying."

Varley's creative imagination prevented him from being too surprised. He remembered the hint of danger at the dinner table last night and understood why Stoke had appeared oblivious. The hint of danger had come from Irene.

"Why have you done this?" he asked.

"Because he made my life a hell. He kept sending me to psychiatrists and now he was trying to bury me in some remote village. Away from temptation." She said this last word contemptuously. "That's a laugh."

"Then you've just murdered your husband."

"*We've* murdered him," she said. "Never forget that. I could tell a story to the authorities that would put us both away for a long time. I hope there'll never be a need."

Varley drove on in outraged, frightened silence. The next time Irene spoke was when he parked the car outside the cottage and went to unlock the front door. She took the key from his hand and turned it in the lock. "I love this house," she said.

That night and the next one had their compensations. Varley had almost forgotten what it was to have a woman in his bed. But still he was shocked by the recent events and deeply angry at the way she had manipulated him. He felt she could not be allowed to get away with it. His mind was made up for him when he went

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into the market a couple of days later and was approached by the manager holding a slip of paper.

"Sorry to trouble you, Mr. Varley, but the American lady, staying with you I understand, took a few items and forgot to check them through. Only a small amount, but I thought you'd want me to mention it."

Varley paid and walked home, his chest rising and falling. He went upstairs and sat at his desk, looking out of the window, thinking. The fine weather had changed and a more seasonal cold wind was blowing across the common.

Yes, he would have to take care of her. A simple household accident was the best way. But not the fall in the bath and the drowning that had done for poor Beatrice. This would have to be something else, perhaps a broken neck at the bottom of those twisting stairs. They were dangerous till you got used to them.

The office door opened and Irene came in without knocking. She was carrying a glass of whiskey—he frowned at his watch—at eleven in the morning. "What are you up to all alone in here?" she asked, sounding bright and self-satisfied.

Carter Varley picked up a pen and added a few words to a paragraph of recent scrawl. "Oh, just busy with my plotting," he said.

It was her second drink, so Irene did not catch the hint of danger in his voice.

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a *NEW* Mr. Strang story by

WILLIAM BRITTAIN

Mr. Strang, the gnome-like science teacher at Aldershot High School, is back in action again, back to his avocation of detection-and-deduction. The little old teacher has a mind as logical and precise as mathematics itself, and this time his "client" is the most important person in Mr. Strang's life—himself . . .

MR. STRANG BUYS A BIG H

by WILLIAM BRITTAIN

Marvin W. Guthrey, principal of Aldershot High School, was usually a model of serene, unflustered leadership. But as he headed toward Mr. Strang's science room it was evident he had lost a large percentage of his administrative cool. The degree of his agitation could be ascertained by the fact that he was going up the down stairway.

Nervously he rapped three times on the glass pane of the classroom door. Mr. Strang left the students, who were grouped around the demonstration table, and opened the door.

"Leonard," whispered Guthrey. "Down in my office—the police. That Sergeant Roberts and—"

"Paul Roberts is a friend of mine," said the teacher, peering over the tops of his black-rimmed glasses. "I'm sure it's nothing serious."

"I don't know, Leonard. The man with him—a Mr. Warne—is with the government." Guthrey's eyes widened. "The *federal* government. They're here on official business. And they want to see you."

"But what about my class?"

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"I'll see to the class. Just go. I'd like those men out of the building before the dismissal bell rings. Loading the buses in this rain will be problem enough without any additional confusion."

Mr. Strang shrugged. "Whatever you say, Mr. Guthrey. But be sure and put the corpse back in the storage-room freezer before you lock up for the day."

"The what?" Guthrey paled.

"Caligula—our white rat. He died last night and we were doing a dissection to see if we could find the cause. He'll be pretty ripe tomorrow if he isn't kept on ice."

Before Guthrey could reply, the little old science teacher was walking stiffly down the stairs toward the office.

Detective Sergeant Paul Roberts and another young man, both wearing damp raincoats, were seated at the conference table in Guthrey's office when Mr. Strang entered. Roberts raised his voice over the raindrops pelting against the window.

"Mr. Strang, this is Hal Warne. He's with the F.B.I."

"Treasury, actually," said Warne, leaning across the table to shake the teacher's hand. "Paul here tells me you're not only a good teacher, but you can keep your mouth shut when the situation calls for it."

"I'd like to think I'm reasonably discreet," said the teacher, sliding into a chair. "Now what's this all about?"

Warne shot a glance at Roberts, then looked back to Mr. Strang. "We—we're really not at liberty to say."

"Isn't this just a bit irregular?" asked Mr. Strang. "You call me away from my class, but you won't tell me why. What now? Do we just sit and stare at each other until the students are dismissed?"

"What Hal's trying to say, Mr. Strang," said Roberts, "is that we want you to do something for us. But we can't tell you the reason. You'll ask a lot of questions we can't answer right now."

"Can't or won't?" snapped the teacher.

Warne looked at Roberts and shrugged.

"Do you want me to do something illegal, Paul?" Mr. Strang asked the detective.

"No, it . . .Well, we just can't talk about it, that's all."

"You've certainly aroused my curiosity. What is it you want me to do?"

"There's a boy here in Aldershot. A high-school senior. We want you to tutor him in science. Twice a week ought to do it. He's very bright."

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"Oh? Is he sick? Can't come to school?"

Warne held up a hand. "No comment," he snapped. "You don't know him, Mr. Strang. He's never been to this school."

"Oh." Mr. Strang grimaced. "Curiouser and curiouser. May I know his name?"

Roberts and Warne conferred in whispers, then Warne spoke in a hushed tone. "It's Yanak—David Yanak."

"Yanak," Mr. Strang said thoughtfully. "Yanak. There was a man by that name back in the '60's, wasn't there? He was tried for—"

"We'd rather you wouldn't jump to conclusions, Mr. Strang," Roberts interrupted. "Suppose we forget that the government is asking. Will you do this as a kind of personal favor?"

"Well, Paul." Mr. Strang shrugged. "If you put it that way, how can I refuse?"

"When can you start?" asked Warne.

"Right now, if you like. I'll talk to the boy and see what he already knows. By the way, how do I get to his house?"

"I'll take you," said Warne. "I'll have my car at the front entrance in, say, ten minutes."

"I'll be along later," said Roberts. "And Hal, don't forget the Big H."

"I beg your pardon?" Mr. Strang blinked through his glasses. "The what? Or shouldn't I ask about that, either?"

Roberts grinned. "David Yanak has this craving for junk food. Particularly the pride of Harold's Heavenly Hamburgers. The Big H—a gob of ground beef drenched in some kind of sauce, all in a synthetic-tasting roll."

"And don't forget the French fries and milk," added Warne. "We'll pass right by the place on our way, Mr. Strang. I'll pick it up then."

But a quarter of an hour later, as Warne circled the block on which Harold's Heavenly Hamburgers had erected its plastic palace, he found the errand more difficult than expected. The rain apparently had given half of the population of Aldershot a yen for a Big H, and there wasn't a parking spot to be found anywhere.

"A shame to disappoint the boy," said Mr. Strang. "Why don't you let me go in and get it? You can just drive around until I come out."

Warne stopped the car. "Okay," he said. "I'll meet you right here."

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Within ten minutes Mr. Strang was back in the car with hamburger, French fries, and a carton of milk resting in his lap on a paper tray which the downpour had soaked.

Warne's car glided through Aldershot's wealthy east end, finally pulling into the curved drive of a Tudor-style mansion set well back from the street and nearly concealed by a towering wall of privet hedge.

"The front door's unlocked," said Warne, stopping the car. "There's a little entranceway inside. You can wait there out of the rain. Ring the bell and somebody will open the inner door. I have to put the car away."

The teacher nodded and got out of the car. Gripping the tray, he trotted stiffly through the pelting rain, threw open the door, and stepped inside with a sigh of relief.

He found himself in a small entranceway. In front of him a massive locked door with a peephole barred admission to the house itself. On a side wall, a second door—probably to a clothes closet—stood slightly open. Opposite it was a table on which sat a deep wicker basket containing quite a lot of mail. He inspected his damp features in the mirror above the table, pressed the bell button, listening to the drip of water from his raincoat onto the rubber mat on the floor.

There was a click of a door opening and he was grasped gently by the shoulders. "Your coat, sir," said a voice in a clipped British accent. "I'd be glad to take it."

Mr. Strang allowed his coat to be stripped off—no easy job since it was soaked through. Finally he stood with his back to the closet door as the unseen man held the wet coat inches from the teacher's face.

"It seems a bit damp, sir," the man went on with magnificent understatement. The coat was lowered to reveal a jowled face with no expression whatsoever. "I'm Alston, sir. I manage the affairs of the house."

"I see. Kind of butler?"

"Yes, you could use that term, I suppose. And you'd be Mr. Strang. Please come in. We're expecting you. I'll see that your coat is dried out."

Mr. Strang followed Alston into a living room the size of a basketball court, richly furnished in Oriental style. The soggy paper tray was beginning to sag in the middle, and Mr. Strang clutched it tightly in both hands.

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Before the butler could close the door, Warne darted inside and took off his raincoat. "We'll go right up and meet David," he said, gesturing toward the curving stairway.

At the top of the stairs the two men walked along a hallway. Where it made a right angle, Mr. Strang noticed that a mirror had been cunningly placed so that it would be impossible for anyone to approach unseen.

In front of a door at the far end of the hall stood a mountain of a man whose receding brow and prominent jaw reminded Mr. Strang of the Easter Island monoliths. "Who's dis?" the giant rumbled in a deep voice.

"Mr. Strang," said Warne. "David's teacher. You were told he was coming."

"Got to frisk him. Boss's orders."

"But you can't—" Warne sighed his annoyance. "Mr. Danko is on guard here, Mr. Strang. He takes his job very seriously. Suppose you let him search you. It'll make him feel better."

Danko patted the teacher's pockets expertly, made a quick inspection of the tray, then reluctantly allowed Mr. Strang to enter the room, followed by Warne.

David Yanak was dressed in shorts and reclining under a sunlamp in the corner of his bedroom. On the boy's chest a tiny white kitten was standing with one paw raised. Scooping up the animal and placing it gently on the floor, David got up and took off his shaded goggles.

Warne performed the introductions. "Hi, Mr. Strang," the boy smiled. "Thanks for coming. I can use the help, and it'll be good to have somebody to talk to besides Cueball."

"Who?"

"Cueball. My kitten. He's a lot more interesting company than Danko." David pointed to the kitten, who was toying with a tassel on the bedspread.

"I'll leave you two now," said Warne. "Just let me know when you're ready to leave, Mr. Strang." He went out, closing the door behind him.

Mr. Strang sat down and took a notebook and pencil from a jacket pocket. "Suppose we get started," he said. "First I'll have to know—"

"You brought it!" David yelled, seeing the tray of food the teacher had placed on the night table. "Hey, thanks."

He fell on the hamburger like a starving man, emitting little

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sounds of pleasure between bites. When it was finished he sucked at the grease on his fingers.

"Suppose you save the rest for later," said Mr. Strang. "Let's get going."

"Sure," said David. "Here, Cueball. How about a little milk?" He opened the carton and poured a generous portion into the kitten's dish. Cueball lapped at it with a tiny pink tongue.

"I've been doing some reading in chemistry already. Most of it I can get, but the chapter on precipitates is—" Then David paused, looking strangely at the kitten. Cueball took two tentative steps to one side of the dresser. The kitten's head and tail drooped, and it fell to the floor, a tiny mound of white fur.

David went to the kitten and picked it up in one hand. He lifted the limp paws and examined the closed eyes. Finally he looked at the teacher with a puzzled expression.

"It—it's dead, Mr. Strang."

"It can't be. Just a moment ago it was frisking about like—" The teacher picked up the milk dish and sniffed it. Then he put it on a table with exaggerated care and wiped his hands with a handkerchief.

"Prussic acid," he said almost to himself. "The odor of bitter almonds is quite distinct. It's in the milk."

David looked at the teacher, eyes widening with terror. "Danko!" he screamed shrilly. "Danko, help! He tried to kill me!"

The room door banged against the wall as Danko stormed inside. He grabbed Mr. Strang, lifting the frail teacher clear of the floor. Two massive arms encircled the teacher's body. As they tightened, the air rushed out of his lungs. Red spots swam before his eyes, and he knew that if the pressure increased, his ribs would crack like dry twigs.

"Danko, stop!"

The voice was high, almost womanish. And yet there was a note of authority in it, the voice of a man who expects to be obeyed. Slowly, reluctantly, Danko lowered Mr. Strang to the floor. As the teacher gasped for breath his first impression of the man in the doorway was of an aura of white hair, surmounting a face seamed and wrinkled by the years. Deepset eyes were almost obscured by bushy brows.

And then Mr. Strang saw the scar. It started high at the man's left cheekbone and drew an angry white line almost to the point of the chin.

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"Yanak," said the teacher. "Jacob Yanak."

It had been years before, of course, during the late '50's and early '60's. The man's hair had been dark then, and the face not so lined. Scarcely a week had gone by that pictures of that face—that scar—hadn't appeared in the papers, along with screaming headlines above sordid stories of bribery, payoffs, kickbacks, and assorted chicanery. This one man had maintained absolute control over an organization which had succeeded in turning dozens of nationally known paper merchants—politicians, government officials, and businessmen—into criminals. And as many criminals into supposedly legitimate businessmen.

The man nodded his head in acknowledgment. "Nobody ever forgets the scar," he said, tracing it with a slender finger.

There was a pounding of feet in the hallway outside, and then Warne, Alston, and Roberts burst into the room. Roberts' tie was askew, and the butler had lost his look of cool efficiency. Even the razor creases of his trousers had partially disappeared, replaced below the knee with some wrinkles and bagging.

"What is it?" gasped Warne. "What's going on?"

"Tell 'em, Davie," said Yanak.

"He—he tried to kill me," the boy said, pointing an accusing finger at Mr. Strang. In frantic phrases he blurted out the story of Cueball's death.

"It seems, Roberts," purred Yanak in a voice that was deadly calm, "that your Mr. Strang isn't as trustworthy as you made him out to be."

The teacher stood in the center of the room as eyes bored at him from all directions. "Surely you don't think that I—" he began incredulously.

Warne examined the dish of milk and then emitted a long sigh. "What do you want us to think? Paul, I'm not quite sure whether this is your jurisdiction or mine. But my office would appreciate the first chance to question him."

"Now just a minute, Mr. Warne!" Mr. Strang was every inch the teacher, lecturing a naughty boy. "I'll remind you, it was you who got in touch with me, not the other way around. You insisted I come here, but your information as to why was quite sketchy, to say the least. Nevertheless, I obliged you—for Paul Roberts' sake. Now, scarcely an hour later, with not even an attempt at an investigation, you practically accuse me of attempted murder. Well, gentlemen, enough is enough. Before I leave this room I demand

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to know what's going on around here."

Warne turned to Roberts. "Damn it, Paul, you said he was feisty. But this is ridiculous."

"I demand it, sir!" Mr. Strang glared at Warne indignantly. "Or do I inform the newspapers? What happens to your precious secrecy then?"

"Why don't you do like he says, Hal?" said Roberts. "Fair's fair. Besides, in spite of how things look, I don't think he did it."

"But hell, Paul, it's beyond my instructions."

"What instructions will you get if you find out later that he's innocent?"

Warne looked for support to Yanak who merely shrugged. "Okay, Mr. Strang. Danko, get some chairs. We'll talk in here. That way none of the rest of the staff has to know what happened."

When they were all seated, Warne faced the gnome-like little teacher and began, "As you probably read in the papers at the time, Jacob Yanak was convicted of several counts of bribery in 1963. The judge threw the book at him. Nobody ever expected him to walk out of prison alive. But some months ago Mr. Yanak communicated with government officials and offered a deal. He'd give us information about some of the country's top narcotics operations. Cases the F.B.I. couldn't crack without his help."

"I see," said Mr. Strang. "And in return he'd be released from prison. Is that it?"

"We promised a little more than that. There was no way to keep quiet the fact that our information was coming from Yanak. We knew the syndicate would be out for revenge. The usual procedure in cases like this is to give important informants a whole new identity—new Social Security number, new name, new driver's license, the works. Even a new place to live. That's what we tried to do with the Yanaks. But the first time we tried it didn't work."

"The first time?"

"That's right," said Jacob Yanak, who was seated on the bed. "Me and my family—my son, his wife, and David here—were living in Seattle and using the name of Schneider. I don't know how, but they found us. The Coast Guard discovered my son's body floating in Puget Sound. He'd been dead three days with a bullet in his head. His wife—David's mother—hasn't been found yet."

"That meant we had to start all over again," Warne continued.

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"We took this house and staffed it just as a temporary thing until we could arrange all the paperwork for Jake and David's new identities. All in the strictest secrecy. But—well, Jake, you'd better tell about what happened next."

"I got a letter. No signature. It said that even though everybody else was satisfied I'd been hurt enough when my son died and his wife disappeared, he—the guy who wrote the letter—wanted more. He wanted Davie, too."

"But how could he find out—"

"I don't know. But the letter was addressed to this house. It's an old trick. Get a person scared enough and he's bound to make a slip."

"We're doing all we can to protect Jake and David until we're ready to move them," said Warne. "We even brought in the local police. That's what Roberts is doing here."

"What about Danko?" asked the teacher. "Somehow he doesn't look like the police."

"He was with me in the old days," said Yanak. "I'd trust him with my life—or Davie's."

"But David was missing out on his schooling, being cooped up in this house," Roberts chimed in. "Hell, Mr. Strang, I've known you for years. Your coming here seemed like the perfect solution for temporary tutoring."

"Look, Mr. Strang," said Warne. "I'm willing to be reasonable. We had you checked out before contacting you. So we know you're not the man we're looking for. But maybe he got to you, huh? I mean, there was that ten minutes or so after we talked to you and before you got in my car. Did you get a phone call? Or make one? Maybe somebody sidled up to you in the hamburger joint. Just tell me. I'll give you every break I can."

"Cut it out, Hal," said Roberts. "Mr. Strang is as straight as a die. I mean, a man his age—and a teacher besides."

Mr. Strang threw Roberts a withering glance.

"Yeah?" queried Warne. "Then how do you explain the poisoned milk? When he had it in his hands the whole time?"

"Well, I—uh—" sputtered Roberts.

"The man does have a point, Paul," said Mr. Strang. "All the evidence does seem to point straight at me. But, Mr. Warne, I'm going to ask your indulgence."

"What do you mean?"

"I know I had nothing to do with trying to poison David. There-

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fore, in spite of appearances, there has to be some other explanation. I'd like to attempt to find it. With your permsission, of course."

"Uh—where would you have to look?"

"Right here will be fine. All the principals seem to be present."

Warne looked at Roberts in confusion. "Can he do it, Paul?"

"You're supposed to be the legal expert. I'm used to going by the book, but the book doesn't mention anything like this."

"That's not what I meant. Is the schoolteacher here any good in the brains department? With this detective stuff? Assuming he's not just trying to get himself off the hook."

Roberts thought of all the cases he'd been on where Mr. Strang's assistance had been invaluable. "Yeah, he's good, Hal. He's damn good."

"And there's an added bonus, Mr. Warne," said the teacher.

"Oh? What's that?"

"If I'm successful, you'll have the man you really want." Mr. Strang directed another glance at Roberts. "Not just a broken-down schoolteacher."

"Well . . . !" Warne drummed the top of the dresser with his fingers. "Okay. What's the harm? You've got half an hour, Mr. Strang."

"That should be ample. First, I'd like a closer look at that milk carton."

"We haven't checked for fingerprints."

"Come, come. Mine are all over it. A few more shouldn't hurt."

Warne handed him the carton. Mr: Strang peered intently at it. "Would there be a magnifying glass about?"

"I've got one I use for my stamp collection." David Yanak rummaged through a bureau drawer. "Here it is."

The teacher accepted it and examined the carton, paying particular attention to the top. "Ah, yes," he said finally. "Just as I suspected."

"What's that, Mr. Strang?" asked Roberts.

"Take a look, Paul. Right there where the tear ends. See that?"

"Hey, yeah. A little hole. Like a pin's been jabbed in, right through the seam of the cardboard."

"Not a pin—a hypodermic needle. So at least we know how the poison got inside the carton."

"Great," said Warne sarcastically. "Somebody just came up to you and said your milk needed a vaccination, huh?"

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"No. It would take a few seconds to locate the seam so carefully, and a few moments to press home the hypodermic plunger. I'd have noticed something. Tell me, Mr. Warne, when did David ask you to get him the hamburger?"

"Paul and I were just heading out to the school to see you. David came to the top of the stairs and shouted down to us that he wanted us to get him the hamburger, fries, and milk."

"I see. He was loud enough to be overheard, then. So you two came over to the school, where you talked with Mr. Guthrey and then with me. Finally we drove to Harold's and then back here. Would an hour and a half be a reasonable estimate of the time?"

"Yeah," shrugged Warne. "Yeah, I guess so."

"And now to you, Mr. Yanak." The teacher spun in his chair. "Did anyone leave this house during the time Warne and Sergeant Roberts were gone?"

"What do I know about leaving the house?" asked Yanak. "I was upstairs with Davie. Ask Alston. The front door is his responsibility."

"What about it, Alston?"

"I really couldn't say, sir. You see, the grocery boy made a delivery, and it's cook's day off. I spent part of that time in the kitchen."

"How long?"

"Perhaps twenty minutes. For the rest, though, I was at the front door all the time."

"But there were twenty minutes when somebody could have slipped in or out without your noticing?"

"Out, perhaps," said Alston. "But not in. The door's always kept locked."

"What are you driving at, Mr. Strang?" asked Roberts.

"Paul, I suspect that a substitution was made. That the carton of milk I purchased at Harold's was not the same one David poured Cueball's milk from. There'd be no way of telling. All the cartons look identical."

"What?" Warne took two long steps and stood looking down at the teacher. "You know something, Mr. Strang. You remind me of an animal with its foot in a trap, struggling to get away. What difference does it make if an *army* of people walked in or out the front door? Or if somebody had fifty extra cartons of milk? The fact is, you had that tray of food in your hands from the time you bought it until David took it."

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"I know that, confound it. Haemosporidia! That's the one hitch in every theory I've been able to imagine. Let me see. I came out of Harold's and got in the car. The ride to this house—inside and up the stairs —"

The teacher made small movements with an index finger as if he were a musical conductor, guiding his own thought processes. Then the finger slowed to a stop and the hand was poised.

"Yes, by heaven. That was it. It had to be that way."

"Are you on to something, Mr. Strang?" asked Roberts.

"Yes. Oh, beautiful, beautiful. I feel like emulating Archimedes and running through the streets shouting 'Eureka!' I'd wear clothes, of course."

"What is it?" asked Warne skeptically.

With a dramatic gesture Mr. Strang swept his black-rimmed glasses from their perch on his nose and crammed them into a pocket. "From what we know, we can assume it was possible for *someone to leave this house, purchase a second carton of milk*, and add the poison without anyone else being the wiser. Correct, Mr. Warne?"

Warne waved his hand indulgently. "For the sake of argument, I'll agree it could have been done. So what? A second carton couldn't have been substituted for the one you bought while you were holding the tray in front of your own eyes every moment."

"Exactly. I was holding the tray all the time. Except —"

The silence in the room was eerie. Then Jacob Yanak spoke.

"Except when, Mr. Strang?"

The teacher's index finger pointed upward triumphantly. "Except when Alston helped me off with my coat! I had to set the tray down then to get my coat off."

Frowning, Roberts pantomimed the process of removing a coat. "Couldn't you have passed the tray from one hand to the other, Mr. Strang? Just long enough to pull your arms out of the sleeves?"

"Impossible, Paul. The tray was too soggy from the rain it had soaked up. It would have collapsed or broken."

Warne cocked a skeptical eyebrow. "You're saying Alston tried to poison David? He's the guy we've been looking for?"

"I am saying that, Mr. Warne."

"That's the craziest thing I ever heard in my life."

"Is it? Hear me out. Then do with me what you will. But I warn you—Alston must not be given another chance to get at David."

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Yanak snapped his fingers and pointed to Alston, who seemed to shrink in his chair. Danko moved ponderously behind the perspiring butler.

"First of all," the teacher went on, "whom do we have involved? You two policemen? Not likely suspects. Danko? He'd known and respected Jacob Yanak since before David was born. Yanak himself? Ridiculous.

"But Alston? You said yourself, Mr. Warne, that your men rented this house and staffed it at the same time. That presumably would include Alston. In other words he came on the scene at precisely the time the assassin could be expected to show up. But he had to find a way of killing without throwing suspicion on himself. To compound his problem there was the formidable Danko, always at David's door. And then Alston heard something that greatly interested him."

"What did he hear, Mr. Strang?" asked Roberts.

"He heard David at the top of the stairs shouting down to Warne and you that he wanted a Big H hamburger with French fries and milk. Here was Alston's opportunity. Once you two went to the school, he left the house, drove to Harold's, and bought the substitute carton. In this huge house he knew he'd never be missed."

"I—I never left the house," said the quivering Alston.

"But you did," replied the teacher. "Your clothing is immaculate, Mr. Alston, as a perfect butler's should be. But the crease in your trousers disappears below the knees. Exactly what happens when a man wearing a raincoat goes out in a storm like the one we're having. His body is protected, but the lower trouser legs get pretty well drenched."

All heads turned to consider the lower part of Alston's trousers.

"Alston returned," the teacher continued, "and injected the poison into the milk. A bit later I arrived with David's snack and stood in the entranceway. When he looked through the peephole, I suppose Alston was expecting Mr. Warne, but this was no problem.

"He gripped the shoulders of my coat to assist me in removing it—or so I thought. And automatically I put down the tray. The most natural thing in the world. So natural I'd forgotten all about it until a few moments ago. And where would be the most natural place to set down the tray? On that handy little table across from the clothes closet, of course. And on that table sits a rather deep

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wicker basket, used to hold mail. What better place to conceal the carton of poisoned milk than under the mail?

"Alston cut off my field of vision by waving my own coat in my face with one hand, while with the other he quickly made the substitution. And then, all innocence, he allowed me to take the tray up to David. Presto, the perfect crime. Except for the unexpected intervention of Cueball."

Warne sat silently for several seconds after Mr. Strang had finished. "Interesting," he said finally. "Very interesting, Mr. Strang. But not really conclusive. Sure, it might have happened that way. But I don't buy pinning this on Alston because of the way his pants are pressed. I'd need more proof than that."

"Proof? Yes, of course. Well, I think right now, Mr. Alston has a rather urgent disposal problem."

Mr. Strang pointed to the container of milk on the table. "Here we have the poisoned milk. But what about the other carton? Its contents could be poured down the nearest sink as soon as Alston could retrieve it from the basket. Still, he could hardly throw the carton itself away. A second one found so soon after the poisoning would be damning evidence indeed. Burn it? But where? That waxed cardboard burns a rather long time and there's a distinctive odor. Even if he used a fireplace he'd risk someone seeing him and asking what he was doing.

"No, if I were Mr. Alston, I'd simply fold the thing up and put it into a pocket. After all, no suspicion was likely to fall on him. Then he could get rid of it safely later."

"Danko," snapped Yanak. "Search Alston. If he's got that carton, find it."

Danko's hands traveled briskly over Alston's clothing. He reached into the butler's left jacket pocket.

When Danko removed his hand, the thing between his fingers was crushed and bent. But *Harold's Heavenly Hamburgers* in vivid green letters on a yellow background could easily be read.

"You want me to take care of him, Mr. Yanak?" rumbled Danko.

"No, you big ape. We've gone respectable, remember? Let the law have him."

"Mr. Strang," said Warne, "I'd like to apologize for—"

"Nonsense," said Mr. Strang with a blithe wave of his hand. "All in all, I've had a grand time. As a mystery buff I've always wanted to be in on a case where the butler *really* did it."

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a *NEW* short story by

DAVID ELY

a strange strange story———a strange strange——a strange—a

COUNTING STEPS

by DAVID ELY

Mr. Barrow awoke that morning with the suspicion that he was dying. Even so, being a man of habit, he performed his waking rite of counting the rows of figured squares in the wallpaper pattern between the ceiling and the top of the dresser. Having verified the existence of 14 rows, as expected, Mr. Barrow sat up, and with slow deliberate movements swung first one leg and then the other over the edge of the bed and down to the floor, where his slippers were as usual pointed in the proper direction.

Once his feet were in the slippers, Mr. Barrow raised his head and saw his wife in the doorway with his tray. He smiled at her, not so much as a morning greeting as a test of his smiling capacity, for a stroke the month before had temporarily paralyzed all the workings on his left side, from head to toe.

The doctor had expressed optimism about the outcome of the case, but Mr. Barrow, being a lawyer, was professionally inclined to doubt, and had accepted only on a provisional basis the evidence of succeeding weeks, in which sensation and movement had returned. He could now get out of bed unaided, and go to the bathroom and back. He could also get dressed by himself, even though he was not yet strong enough to go downstairs.

What had reassured Mr. Barrow most of all was the sheer routine of being a patient. His regimen of medicine, rest, exercise, and nourishment was as regular as the daily schedule which he followed in his profession. Everything was timed to the minute; nothing was left to chance. Sick or well, Mr. Barrow was a prudent man. "If in doubt, don't," he was fond of saying to his clients.

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Likewise: "Look before you leap"—not that he would ever advise anything like a leap. He would no more go out for lunch ten minutes before the established time than he would attempt an impropriety with the girl who ran the switchboard.

So it was that, having counted the rows in the wallpaper, put on his slippers, and noted the presence of his wife in the doorway, Mr. Barrow was assured that the events of the day—pills, breakfast, exercise, naps—would unfold in their proper order and at their proper time. His death now seemed to him much less likely than it had when he awoke, if only because no provision had been made for such a deviation from his schedule.

At the same time, however, Mr. Barrow recalled with some uneasiness certain remarkable goings-on to which he had been subjected in the past two days. He had not mentioned this problem to his doctor or to his wife, supposing it to be a transitory phenomenon that would soon disappear. But it had not disappeared. He suspected that it was beginning to plague him again today as well, although he couldn't yet be sure, for what seemed to be taking place was confusing, in that it appeared to be part of his routine—or, more exactly, an exaggeration of his routine.

It was almost as if Mr. Barrow's routine had acquired a force and independence of its own, quite apart from his volition. He did not, for example, rise and dress himself until after breakfast, nor did he get dressed more than once a day, and yet he found that he was repeatedly imagining that he was rising, putting on his shirt and trousers, and standing in front of the dresser while he buttoned his cuffs, all so realistically that the first few times it happened he was amazed to discover that he was still in bed, still in his pajamas.

Likewise, he would have the sensation of drinking the water in the glass on the bed table—of drinking it over and over—and yet the glass remained full, and his wife, entering, would remind him to drink it. The actual drinking of the water seemed no more real to him, however, than his imaginary drinkings.

Similarly, he would envision himself turning on the lamp by the bed, or picking up a book, or executing the mild exercises counseled by the doctor—doing these things five, ten, a dozen times, and it was this very repetition that made him wonder if he was doing them at all. The entry of his wife into the room with his medicine or a tray of food also became subject to doubt, for it seemed to him that she entered too frequently, and that if he ac-

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tually took all the medicine she presented to him, and ate all the food, he would be quite ill indeed.

Even at the present moment, while he sat on the edge of the bed, his feet in his slippers, a smile on his face directed toward his wife in the doorway, Mr. Barrow could not be absolutely certain that he was sitting where he seemed to be sitting, or that he was smiling, or that his wife was in the doorway.

Altogether, Mr. Barrow had the feeling that everything he was accustomed to had undergone a profound transformation while remaining in appearance quite the same as before. It was this treachery of the familiar that disquieted him. He belived that he was lucid in his mind, and that his basic sensory equipment was no longer impaired. Why, then, was there this troubling repetition of routine actions which surely for the most part he was imagining?

He did not want to think about it, and, as was his habit, he reminded himself that the world was a rational world by taking stock of certainties—in this case, he again counted the figured squares in the wallpaper and was gratified to find that there were still 14 rows between the ceiling and the top of the dresser. But then he realized that he could not count the rows unless he were lying in bed in his waking position, whereas surely he was sitting on the edge of the mattress looking at his wife in the doorway.

To cover his confusion, he said the first thing that came into his mind: "Is it time for my medicine?" Immediately he was overtaken by doubt, for his question evoked no answer from his wife, nor did the expression on her face alter in any way, which indicated either that he had not spoken aloud, or that she hadn't heard him—or that she was not where she seemed to be.

Furthermore, even as he sat (or seemed to sit) on the edge of the bed, he was imagining himself standing at the dresser, buttoning the cuffs of his shirt and idly examining the keys and change that he would shortly slip into his trousers pocket. He was able to count the change: three quarters, a dime, and a penny. At the same time he was aware of his wife in the doorway. She was holding the usual tray, with two slices of toast, a small glass of orange juice, and a saucer on which rested his anti-coagulant capsule.

Mr. Barrow knew that one of these two visual effects was false. Undoubtedly it was the one at the dresser—and yet why hadn't his wife answered his question? And why was she still poised in

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the doorway? It seemed to him that she had been standing there far too long.

As a lawyer, Mr. Barrow was accustomed to analyze difficult problems by proceeding from one undisputed fact to the next, discarding whatever was irrelevant. But in his present circumstances, there seemed to be no undisputed facts—or rather, there were far too many of them—and he found himself in a tangle of contradictions, unable to determine what was relevant and what was not. He thought of asking his wife to answer the immediate question—what part of the bedroom did he happen to occupy?—and yet he realized that she was apparently part of the illusion problem, so he could not rely on her testimony.

The key to the matter, he reasoned, must be a distortion in his reckoning of time. All those glasses of water—he could very well have drunk every one, not in a matter of minutes (as he had supposed) but over an entire day. Likewise, the remarkable succession of meals and pills could be explained if the period involved were several days instead of the mere hour he had erroneously believed to be the case. Thus, time was slipping by him unnoticed.

On the other hand, his wife's immobility in the doorway suggested a contrary distortion, in which time had slowed or even stopped. Indeed, it seemed to him that her left shoe was very slightly raised off the floor, as though she were completing a step, although his observation of this detail was impaired by the fact (if fact it were) that he was also looking at his slippers to be certain that his feet were properly inside them. This, if true, indicated that he had not yet raised his head or smiled, or even seen his wife in the doorway. To wit, while in some instances he might be losing time, and in considerable quantities, in other cases time seemed to be stationary or indeed, inching in reverse.

Disquieted by such reflections, Mr. Barrow tried to turn his thoughts to something that would soothe or distract him, and ease his mind. It was a pity he'd stopped collecting stamps. He couldn't even leaf through his old albums, for he'd given them to his nephew. Apart from pottering about in the yard on weekends, he had done nothing with his leisure time except read or watch television or think about his work.

On Sundays he and his wife had gone to church, where by habit he counted the number of fellow-worshippers and estimated the money in the collection plate when it came by. He paid little heed to the sermons except once when the word "judgment" had alerted

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him professionally, although of course the minister had been talking about the judgments of the Lord.

He was getting dressed again, apparently. There he was, buttoning his cuffs, and examining the change and keys he would shortly put into his trousers pocket—except he never did manage to reach the point at which the change and keys were in fact pocketed. Instead, he would find himself back in bed counting the rows of wallpaper squares, or drinking that eternal glass of water, or smiling at his wife, or looking at his slippers, or taking his medicine, or doing all these things more or less simultaneously. It was, quite frankly, irritating in the extreme, and he finally closed his eyes to shut it out.

Thus shielded, Mr. Barrow decided to leave the bedroom, not in a physical sense—which seemed too risky—but in his thoughts, and so he pursued in his imagination the routine he had followed every workday morning for 33 years. He would pocket his change and keys at last, give his suit jacket a quick smoothing, walk out of the room, and descend the 17 steps to the front hall. In the dining room, his wife would have his breakfast ready, the morning paper neatly folded beside the coffee cup. He always read while he ate.

At 8:23 on the dot he would go out to the curb, where the taxi he shared with a businessman down the block would be waiting. By nine o'clock he would be entering his office building. There were 83 steps through the lobby. He counted them every day in his mind (whenever he found that he took a step more or a step less, he adjusted the count on the next occasion). The elevator would take him 16 stories up, and then there would be 21 steps along the corridor, 15 more from the outer door past the switchboard girl to the desk where his secretary sat, and a final 12 paces into his own office.

Having thus abstractly arrived at work, Mr. Barrow proceeded to imagine his normal business day. He examined his mail, already sorted by his secretary, and called her in to dictate responses to the most important items. He then made and received telephone calls, studied various documents, dispatched his clerk to the law library for research, saw clients by appointment, ate his lunch in the little restaurant across the street, circled the block for exercise, and returned to his office for further dictation, telephone calls, and appointments. At 5:37 he presented himself at the corner for the taxi and his return ride home, where he ate

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supper, watched television, took his bath, and read a book until 11:15, when he turned off his bed lamp.

This evocation of his daily round afforded Mr. Barrow a certain relief. He opened his eyes, found himself lying in bed under the covers, imagined that he had just awakened, and proceeded to count the rows of figured squares in the wallpaper pattern again. There were 14 rows, as expected, but his satisfaction at having confirmed this unvarying number was qualified by doubt. Hadn't he already awakened—and hadn't he already counted those rows?

He sat up and with slow deliberate movements swung first one leg and then the other over the edge of the bed and down to the floor, but as he inserted his feet into his slippers, he was perturbed by the recollection of having done that very thing just a few seconds before. "Either I was dreaming then or I am dreaming now," thought Mr. Barrow—but he didn't think he was dreaming.

Raising his head, he saw his wife in the doorway. "Is it time for my medicine?" he asked. But his wife was beside the bed now, and he had the glass of water in his hand. He drank it down. His wife had gone, and he was sitting on the edge of the bed again, putting his feet into his slippers.

This will not do, thought Mr. Barrow. Once more he closed his eyes, and in his mind he dressed, turned and left the room, and went down the 17 steps to the front hall, and so into the dining room for his breakfast, following which, he repeated his imaginary progression from taxi to office, pacing off the 83 steps across the lobby, rising the 16 stories in the elevator, walking the 21 steps along the corridor, and arriving in the usual manner at his desk, where he again examined his mail, called in his secretary for dictation, and went through the other ordinary business of the morning as before.

This second conjuration of his working day was less soothing to Mr. Barrow, although it was exactly like the first, which was to be expected, as he never departed from his established routine. Still, he was vaguely disturbed by it, for he did not have the impression of controlling matters voluntarily. That is, he would have preferred to speed his progress from taxi to office, but it appeared that he had to take those 83 steps through the lobby, just as he felt obliged to remain at his desk until his regular lunchtime.

Mr. Barrow chafed under these apparent restrictions, which seemed excessive, as he was at work only in his imagination, and

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should be free, therefore, to do as he pleased—to go out to lunch early or fly to the moon, for that matter. He considered attempting to assert his independence, but caution forestalled him. Suppose he sought to leave his desk but could not do so? A pretty kettle of fish that would be, reflected Mr. Barrow. Better not try.

And so he remained where he had imagined himself to be, dutifully completing the rest of the day, which seemed to require hours, even though he supposed it was accomplished in a few seconds, for according to his best reckoning, in the space of time necessary for him to sit up in bed, swing his legs over the edge, put on his slippers, and smile at his wife, he had, in fantasy, drunk a gallon of water, got himself dressed six or seven times, and put in two full working days at the office.

He reopened his eyes. Yes, he was sitting on the edge of the bed, putting his feet into his slippers. He closed his eyes again—and immediately imagined himself pocketing his change and keys, ready to go downstairs for another breakfast. Mr. Barrow began to feel considerably vexed. Was he to have no peace from this? He wondered again, with some irritation, if he were dying—or if, in fact, this were his last instant of consciousness, in which shifting images were contending for his fading attention.

Unlikely, thought Mr. Barrow. A dying man would surely experience some sort of emotional profundity—awe, joy, perhaps terror—whereas he was more annoyed than anything else by the repetition of the trivial actions which he was (or was not) engaged in.

Besides, if he were dying, he would probably recall scenes of his formative years—his home, his parents, his childhood—and all he could force into his mind was a recollection of himself as a boy walking to school, counting the paces from one block to the next, being careful not to step on the cracks in the sidewalk. Mr. Barrow remembered that there were 137 steps on Grove Avenue between Pine and Walnut, and that in the middle of the block he had had to execute a complicated maneuver where the damaged pavement presented a network of cracks. In front of the church the sidewalk was paved with brick, so he'd had to do a sort of toe-dance there. Cracks were bad luck, especially in front of a church. Judgments of the Lord. And then from Walnut to Oak, there were 83 steps—no, it was 83 across the lobby, which he now seemed to be pacing off.

He was going to work again.

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Mr. Barrow opened his eyes. His wife was no longer in the doorway. She was beside the bed, preparing to remove his tray. "Am I still alive?" Mr. Barrow said. He could hear his voice. It sounded fussy, as if he were asking why she hadn't brought the morning paper.

She didn't answer him. She was gone, and he was flexing his left leg the way the doctor had instructed him to do. He was walking around the room in his bathrobe. His wife was in the doorway with the tray. "Is it time for my medicine?" Mr. Barrow asked. He was at the dresser, buttoning his cuffs, and idly examining the change and keys that he would shortly slip into his trousers pocket. He closed his eyes, and descended the 17 steps to the front hall.

"Am I still alive?" he asked. "Am I still? Am I?"

He sought to think of eternal things. Where was the awe, the terror? The taxi came at 8:23 every morning without fail. He stepped off the curb with care, look before you leap, avoid the cracks, the judgments.

He reached out for the glass of water on the bed table—— his wife was in the doorway—— he was at the dresser—— 21 steps along the corridor——his slippers were as usual pointed in the proper direction——swung first one leg and then the other over—drank the glass of water—called in the secretary for dictation—dispatched the clerk—sat up in bed and with slow deliberate the judgments of the Lord swung first one through the lobby to the elevator descended the 17 sat up in bed the doorway the dresser the steps the judgments of the Lord of the Lord of the of

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DEPARTMENT OF SECOND STORIES

Patricia L. Schulze's first story, "The Last Prowl," appeared in our February 1977 issue. It was a crooks-and-cops story—an interesting but traditional debut in print. Her second story is something else—an enormous advance in conception and execution, an imaginative and poetic probing of the thoughts and feelings of a woman who knows that "the dead are of more use to poets than the living" . . .

THE GOLDEN CIRCLE

by PATRICIA L. SCHULZE

I watch through the bars of the hospital window and wait for the car. The August heat is rising in waves from the asphalt below. Across the parking lot the ugly backs of apartment buildings shimmer and sway in the heat. There is a young woman with golden hair looking out of a third-floor window in the middle building. I wave but she doesn't see me. The sun glares off the window and I can't see into her room.

Down below, a fire hydrant has been opened and the water snakes out in a sweeping arc. The asphalt steams and hisses where the spray hits it. There are children in cut-off jeans dancing in the jet of water from the hydrant, dancing under the rainbow the sun casts on the spray.

There were children in August a year ago, and I watch them from my apartment window after shaking out a rug. Children dancing under the spray of a fire hydrant in cut-off jeans.

I turn, laughing. "Theo, do you remember when the year started in September? Do you remember jeans?"

He is packing the folders from his file cabinet into sturdy cardboard cartons. He shakes his head.

"You know, how the new jeans in September were so stiff, so unyielding. They cut into your stomach when you tried to bend

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over. Then, by the time winter was over, they had grown softer, and by spring they were too short."

He stares at me. "What are you talking about, Julie?"

"Jeans. In summer mother would get out her giant scissors and those poor jeans, faded and thin in the knees, would be transformed into cut-offs."

He writes something on a slip of paper on his desk. "Jeans. That's a good idea, Julie. We'll pick some up when we leave town."

I watch him as he goes back to his packing, then I fold the rug and put it on top of a box by the chair. I walk across the room and run a finger over the piano keys.

"There's no way we can take the piano, is there?"

Theo slips a folder into the carton. "We've been over that before, Julie."

"It just seems so long."

Theo fixes tape over the carton flaps. "Six months, Julie, only six months. Then you can tinkle away all you want." He smiles at me over the carton. "It won't be so bad, you'll have me."

He picks up the carton and carries it down to the car. He doesn't hear my answer. Was there any?

I stand at this barred window, twisting a golden circle on my finger, watching children dancing in the water. Where will Theo take me when I leave here? I have asked Dr. Jouvet this many times.

"Your husband does not choose to take me into his confidence, Julie. He only says he has a place ready." He sees the fear on my face and reaches over and holds my hand. "Where would you like to go?"

"I don't know. Back to the apartment maybe. Somewhere with people and noise, lots and lots of noise, and my piano."

"You need that. Theo understands that now."

"Only Theo knows what Theo understands, Doctor." I see him to the door of my room and bid him adieu, our little game because he is French.

He replies, as he always has, "Say au revoir, Julie, not adieu."

A gardener, watering the hospital flower beds, joins his spray to the hydrant's and the children squeal and duck. Looking up, he sees me watching and playfully jerks his hose toward me. The

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spray of water washes over the window.

September rain washes over the window, distorting images, washing summer dust off the kitchen window in the farmhouse. We have taken a six-month lease on this farm in the middle of the plains for Theo's sake. Theo is a poet, a prophet, a visionary, striving to capture and confine his vision within the split-rail fences of words.

A poet cannot live with asphalt and concrete and steel. A prophet cannot see the future in the cities of the present. A visionary cannot reach humanity under the crushing presence of man.

There is an oak tree outside the kitchen window and it drops its brown acorns on the mulch of 75 years of leaves. We are gathering the acorns, stuffing them into our pockets, and then Theo starts toward the house.

"Don't you want to help me gather them up? We can feed them to the squirrels this winter."

He holds up the one in his hand. "That whole oak, all oak trees are here in this one acorn."

He goes into the house, to his paper and pen, to capture oak trees.

I gather a few more, then stop and walk out across the field behind the house toward the horizon where the sky meets the end of the earth. There is no mark of man to break its clean line. I think if I keep walking I can reach it, but after a few miles it is still just as far away. I go back to the house to tell Theo about the horizon that always stays the same distance away, but he is busy writing, so I go out and sit under the oak tree, fingering a keyboard of leaves.

Dr. Jouvet leans back in his swivel chair. "So in the beginning you liked the farm?"

"Like, dislike, I had no feelings either way. It was just a place we had come to so Theo could write. It was only for six months. You can take any place for six months."

"Theo didn't talk much, did he?"

I shrug. "Theo is a poet, he lives more in his mind. I'm used to that."

"Still, sometimes you did feel trapped there?"

I reach for the cigarette box on his desk but it is empty. He has stopped smoking. "That's only because I can't drive. There was a

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town of sorts, but it was too far to walk and Theo couldn't take time off from his work to take me very often." I pull my own pack out of my bag. "I went for long walks. It was all right."

In October there is a killing frost and the leaves of the oak turn golden yellow and then brown. I walk out toward the clean line of the horizon and discover a small graveyard, the stones half buried in the earth, the inscriptions erased long ago by the weather. Theo is excited by my discovery—the dead are of more use to poets than the living—and works for days to restore the markings. All he manages to get is one: *Baby Jenny, six days.* He will turn it into a poem.

I spend a lot of time walking—the house is too small to keep me busy, and I have noticed something strange. In the sharp October mornings the horizon is a little nearer. When I tell Theo this he takes me to town and I buy wool and needles for a sweater I have seen in an old magazine I found in the attic, something to occupy my fingers.

I still walk every day. I want to reach the point where the sky meets the end of the earth. I want to look over the edge, but it isn't near enough yet. I can't quite reach it.

"Why didn't you come back to the city?" Dr. Jouvet is standing behind my chair.

"Because Theo wasn't ready yet."

"You could have left without him."

I pick up two paper clips from his desk and slip one into the other so that their loops intertwined.

"That's Theo and me."

"The loops can be slipped apart."

I bend the thin wires until they are two interlocking circles.

"But they can't, not unless you break one of the circles."

November sets in with chilling winds that toss the branches of the oak tree and shake down the shriveled leaves to join their older brothers in the mulch below. Theo comes home with a new cow and brings me a steaming cup, bearing it in both hands like an offering. I sip and turn retching from the too-sweet taste, the dusty smell.

"That milk is fresh from our own cow," he says, disappointed in my reaction.

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"It's fine, really, I just have to get used to it." I try to placate him.

I watch him milk the cow, directing the pale stream into his mouth, his lips moving closer and closer to the cow's udder. I back away in disgust.

As I cross the yard to the house I look out at the line of the horizon where the sky meets the end of the earth. I rub my hand across my eyes and look again. There is no mistake, it is nearer. Very soon I will be able to reach it.

Theo writes late into the night, sometimes stopping to walk out under the clear November sky looking for inspiration. He is writing a poem about love.

He no longer shares my bed.

Dr. Jouvet chews on the end of his pencil, a substitute for smoking. "Are you starting to hate Theo?"

This surprises me and I have to think about it for a while. Finally I shake my head. "I never hated Theo."

"But you can see what he's doing to you?"

I nod sadly.

"Don't you think you really should leave him?"

I look at him helplessly and tears run down my face. "But I can't, not now, it's too late."

Dr. Jouvet frowns. "Why do you say it's too late?"

"He's already done it."

"What has he done?"

"He's made me into a poem."

It is December and there are frost flowers on the window. One last defiant brown leaf clings to the oak tree, and snow, damp and sticking, covers the graves of the old dead with its cold blanket.

Theo writes all the time now, hardly stopping to eat or sleep. His study door is always closed and the reams of poetry pile up around the room. The roads are blocked so no one can get in to disturb him. Sometimes the weight of the snow brings down the power lines, and then Theo writes by candlelight.

He is reaching heights he never could before. His eyes glow with the intensity of his vision. Everything he sees, feels, touches, becomes a part of his poetry.

He walks to the old graves and lies down in the snow covering them, absorbing their message through his very bones.

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Dr. Jouvet shakes his head. "I can see Theo, but where is Julie?"

"She is there, watching out the kitchen window, tracing the frost flowers with her finger."

"And the horizon?"

"It is much closer."

"What do you expect to see when you look over the edge?"

"I don't know."

"You know you can't look over, Julie. There is no end of the earth."

"You're wrong, Doctor. There is."

The water dries on the window and the August sun reflects off the roof of a car turning into the parking lot below. The sunlight flashes into my eyes and I squint and reach for my dark glasses, but they aren't here.

In January I wear dark glasses in the house to cut out the dazzling whiteness of the snow. The sun glares off the snow and starts the jagged lightning flashes at the corners of my eyes, bringing on the headaches that keep me in bed all day.

The frost flowers on the window have become joined in one solid opaque sheet. I finger a Bach fugue on the silence of the window sill and melt a circle in the ice with my tongue to see if the horizon has come closer.

Theo has promised me a trip to town, now that the roads are open again. We are to leave this morning, but our neighbor-landlord comes to ask for help at a mid-winter calving. I protest, but the poet, the visionary, has never seen the birth of a calf. He needs it for his art.

He shrugs into his heavy fleece-lined parka. "Don't take on so, Julie. I'll be back by noon. You can still have your holiday."

I stand throughout the morning in the kitchen, cutting up the cold bodies of chickens, longing for cellophane-wrapped meat. My sharp knife flashes in the sun as it severs legs and wings from bodies, cleaves the breasts. I soak the pieces in a bucket and polish the knife until it gleams.

By mid-day the wind is rising, blowing ripples in the dry snow dunes around the house. The roads are already drifting shut again. I clear a spot in the ice on the window and see my last brave leaf shaken out of the arms of its mother oak.

Theo stamps his feet on the kitchen mat, glowing with the lin-

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gering excitement of the birthing and something more, some secret he must share with me.

"I've bought the farm, Julie. I was only going to renew the lease but he wanted to sell so I bought it. In the spring he is going to sell us a sow and some chickens for you to look after."

He hurries for his paper, pen, and ink, the new homesteader, the pioneer on the plains.

The sun reflecting off the drifting snow glints along the knife blade in my hand, flashes into my eyes, dazzling me with its brightness. The stars of brightness flash into my eyes and the knife blade flashes, and again, and again, and I am screaming in the flashing of the knife blade and the glinting of the snow-reflected sun. I am screaming and the horizon is too near and I am screaming and I can look over and I see.

I am one of the new dead, lost under the glistening of the snow.

The circle moves on. January is August. I have lost the months between. I light a cigarette, then put it down in the ashtray by the window.

I hear voices and turn in silence, watching them approach—Dr. Jouvet, my friend who would break the circle if he could, and Theo.

"You're a fool, Theo! You can't take Julie back there. She can't be left alone."

"She won't be alone, I'll be there."

"You were there before!"

Theo smiles his superior poet's smile. "I appreciate all you've done, Dr. Jouvet, but I know what's best for my wife."

Dr. Jouvet shakes his head in wonder at the visionary with his insights and I turn away and trace frost flowers on the window with my finger.

Theo comes to me and smiles. Can he be so unchanged? Then I see the glistening scar that mars his handsome cheek. He too bears the mark of January.

Dr. Jouvet lifts my hand to his lips. "Then this is adieu, Julie. Please take care."

I smile as I withdraw my hand. "Don't look so sad, Doctor. Say au revoir, not adieu."

His eyes search mine. He starts to speak, then looks helplessly at Theo. He gazes at the smoke rising from the ashtray at my side. Carefully, deliberately, he picks up the cigarette, inhales

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deeply, and walks away, taking his knowledge and his failure with him.

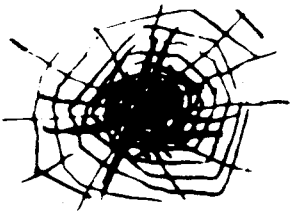
Theo, oh so gently, helps me out of the hospital and into the car. We drive through the city and I must drink in the buildings, the asphalt, the concrete, the steel. Must drink it in and hold it to me for a little while. Too soon we are out of the city and racing along the country roads.

Theo talks excitedly about the hay he is putting up for winter and the new sow with piglets by her side.

I look into his poet's eyes, his prophet's eyes, his visionary's eyes, and see he doesn't see. A cold wind whispers in my ear, whispers a message, and I nod. My fingers play a silent melody along my leg.

Winter will come again. January with its snow and wind. The last brave leaf will fall from the oak tree and the horizon, where the sky meets the end of the earth, will draw near.

The sun will be glaring off the snow, sending its dazzling needles deep into my eyes, glinting off the knife blade in my hand. I will strike deep in the flashing of the light. I will cut true in the silvery radiance of the snow-reflected sun. And there, in the glistening January brilliance, I will break the circle.



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a *NEW* hardboiled detective story by

ALVIN S. FICK

A Black Mask type of story which we don't see too often these days . . . Private eyes are traditionally "tough, slashing, bloodletting"—but there's another breed of men who are just as hardy and calloused. Learn the end results of their particular American way of life in this case about private investigator Ringhorn—with tension and action all the way . . .

THE GREAT AMERICAN GRAVEYARD

by *ALVIN S. FICK*

Charlie Hake isn't a bad guy—a little greedy maybe. When he phoned to say somebody had been stealing parts from the wrecks in his auto graveyard, I tried the kidding routine.

"How can you complain about a few missing alternators and carbs when you practically stole most of the cars they were in?"

Charlie was not impressed by my humor.

"I'll ask you one more time, Ringhorn. You want to come out here and take a look, see if you can grab somebody for me? Or you want to sit in your dinky little office and wait for some woman to come in and ask you to find her lost cat?"

That's how I came to be sitting in the dark of a summer night in what was left of a faded maroon Corvair, surrounded by Charlie's 45 acres of rolling upstate countryside. The two fifties Charlie shoved across his battered and oily counter in the converted barn where he stored parts were no protection from the mosquitoes. They seemed intent on inducing anemia in my six-feet-one of tired muscle and scar tissue. And the two fifties did not help much with the rain which started a half hour after I began my vigil.

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I sat in the back seat of the Corvair where the rain pouring in through the shattered windshield could not reach me. Besides, the instrument panel was pushed too close to the seat for comfort. I didn't relish sitting on those dark rust-colored stains on the front cushions. I'm not squeamish, but I happen to believe blood belongs inside and does not make an attractive decorator pattern on upholstery.

"I've had it up to here," Charlie had said when I agreed to try to slow down the pilferage which he declared had amounted to more than $3000 in two months. He held a grease-blackened hand to his forehead. "The sheriff's office says how do I know what I lost, have I got an inventory. Look, I know there's four hundred and sixty-three cars and trucks out there—no, four hundred and fifty-five. We crushed and hauled out eight today. It's no matter that my units are scattered all over this place. I know where everything is."

Charlie wiped a bead of sweat from his chin with a forefinger, leaving a black streak that looked like an incipient goatee.

"Sheriff sends a deputy riding by the back road twice a night for two nights. Fat lot of good that does. State police say they got manpower problems, so get myself a dog. I got two expensive dogs dead already—one poisoned, one shot. You want to try, you got my hundred. Catch somebody, I'll give you a hundred more."

"My fee is a hundred a day plus expenses." I pocketed the two fifties. "Any idea why your place is being hit? I learned you had some trouble when I was talking to the county investigator a couple of weeks ago. But he didn't say anything about any of the other used-parts dealers having problems. Why you?"

"Why me? Why me? Maybe I'm just good-looking. Maybe I'm rich. How the hell do I know why me?" Charlie's anger over his losses was spilling out of control, and I find it difficult to get answers from a client who is waving his arms.

"I'll spend some time here tonight. And I don't mind telling you I'm going to rip off a mirror for the passenger side of my car. Got a little too close to a utility pole a few days ago."

"Go ahead. Why should you be an exception? But I'll deduct it from your bill." Charlie was still waving his arms. I was nearly out the door when he called after me, "Maybe I got the best cars. Ha! That's it! I got the best cars. That's why I get hit."

So there I sat, the rain drumming down on the tin of that Corvair loud enough to drown out the fiddling of the crickets in the

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weeds. I had seen only two cars go by on the narrow blacktop road bordering the back side of Charlie's fields. Neither of them slowed. Their headlights, diffused by the rain, looked like yellow candles in the night.

When I had walked into the fields after parking my car in a patch of woods a half mile down the road, my first thought was that this was a bad place to try to find anybody. The landscape, warm and golden under the evening sun, was a jungle of smashed and rusted hulks. It looked as if some giant bad-tempered kid had upended his toy box and petulantly smashed right and left with a hammer. Cadillacs lay on their backs like beached whales, along with Fords, Chevs, Pontiacs, Plymouths, pickups, convertibles, and here and there a diminutive scrunched-up foreign job. Hoods up, doors off, glass gone—hear that music, all those AM-FM's, all that eight-track stereo boom-de-boom-boom-boom, all those warm nights and making out in the back seat, all that scream of rubber on the road—and all too many times the other kind of scream, the one which comes just before the crash.

I guessed right away I was going to earn my money. To hide here, all a man needed to do was lie down in the hip-high weeds, weasel through the grass, and crawl into one of the cars. It would take a swami or a dowser of lost persons to find him. If I'd had better sense or less self-righteousness about paying my bills, I would have told Charlie to keep his hundred, that I was going back to my office to help a lady find a lost cat.

Nobody in his right mind would be stealing parts on a night like this, I told myself. I felt water dripping off the door frame of the Corvair into my shoe. I flipped the switch on my three-cell flashlight. I was hunched against the right-rear corner of the seat, the Smith & Wesson on my belt clip gouging into the soft spot where God took the rib to make Eve. Why hadn't I picked a roomier car—say a 1951 Packard? And no private investigator would continue a stakeout under these conditions—not if he had the brains of an ant.

I sat five minutes longer, vainly hoping the rain would let up. I was thinking how nice it would be to be dry, to sink into the old sofa in my apartment, feet up on the scarred coffee table, with my pipe and a Lowenbrau dark. It was the last named that did it. I leaned forward to open the door of the Corvair. My hand never touched the handle. Somebody opened it for me.

They had me out of there so fast my butt scarcely touched the

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seat. And then they were swinging. One of them had something wrapped in a rag. I went to my knees from Corvair-induced muscle cramps. That probably saved me from carrying a tin patch in my skull the rest of my life—setting off metal detectors in airports and all that.

Rag-wrap creased the side of my head above the ear. Whatever he had in that rag was heavy and hard. It glanced off and hit full bore on the big deltoid muscle on the top of my shoulder. I went down, dragging with me the goon who was holding me. The two of us thrashed in a tangle of legs and arms in the wet weeds, grunting and trying to get in a couple of licks. I kicked him in the stomach, feeling great regret at missing his groin. The air went out of him in a whoosh.

The bigger of the two was crouched and swinging, but a downward blow from that position is rarely effective. I squirmed and rolled in the wet darkness, got out of range and on my feet. Dying on your back is okay if you're sick, but it's a bad way to go if you have your health.

We both swung. I beat him by the fraction of a second. The flashlight shattered against the hand holding the rag. He dropped whatever was wrapped in it.

Some people have the mistaken notion that a fight is a noisy affair. That depends. The deadly ones are quiet, scary-quiet. Unless somebody pulls a gun they stay that way. Rag-wrap had a busted hand. I had a busted flashlight. But he did not yell in pain. Numbness takes care of that. Just like it took care of my shoulder. And that's why there was no loud bang to interrupt the sound of rain on rusty cars, to hush the insect chorus in that weedy field. My right arm hung down, and to have reached for the gun with the left hand meant dropping the flashlight. There was no way I could have done it in time.

They were gone as quickly and quietly as they came. I stood there panting a little, the rain mixing with sweat and running in rivulets down my ribs.

Call it a night. Now if I could get out of this jungle of iron without killing myself by falling into an empty engine compartment. It wasn't easy. My shoulder had a fire in it. I stopped once to lose the Beef Stroganoff I had for supper—a shameful waste. It took me thirty minutes to get back to my car.

The interior light showed that much of the wet was not rain. My head cut, as head cuts will do, had bled freely. In spite of the

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rain it had started to mat in my hair. My shirt was a crimson ruin.

When I got back to the apartment, the first thing I did after peeling off the wet clothes was to trim the hair around the cut, starting the bleeding again. The cut was only about an inch and a quarter but it was deep. My shoulder hurt so much I felt no pain in the cut when I shaved a narrow strip and pulled things together with a flesh-colored Band-Aid. The sink looked pretty with that rose-colored shaving foam floating in red water.

Before I turned in I washed down some aspirins with a half tumbler of Jim Beam. It definitely was a Jim Beam rather than a Löwenbräu night. I turned the bell control on the phone all the way down and buried the instrument under the cushions of the sofa. I unplugged the extension in the bedroom, set the heating pad on medium, wrapped it around my shoulder, and crawled into bed.

I read somewhere that sleep is close to death, and that's why old people—the ones who are still fighting off that long last big one—often sleep little, hawking around most of the night. Some watch the late late show but are up at 5:00 a.m. The others, who have had quite enough of this once-good green planet, sleep most of the time, until finally all the bells in Christendom won't rouse them. The unpatented medicine did the job. When I crept out the next morning—gingerly, gingerly—it was 9:30.

The sunshine pouring in the window above the sink in the kitchen-dinette was nice. I stood in it while I mixed three eggs and some half and half. While the scrambled eggs kept warm in the oven, the Jones Farm sausages sizzled quietly on low heat. The shave and shower helped. But I can tell you private investigator Ringhorn shaved very carefully, with his left hand. He was not eager to lose any more blood.

On the ride out to Charlie Hake's emporium of distressed iron I sorted out the preceding day's events in my mind. The conclusion was inescapable—I had been set up. But by whom? That would have to wait until I talked to Charlie.

Charlie was outside haggling with the driver of a tow truck who had a mangled Toyota Corolla on the hook. I used the time to look over the interior of the barn. A second-floor gallery with steel bins housed smaller parts—alternators, coils, ignition wiring, radiators, and the like. Aside from two small offices, the first floor was an impossible litter of chain falls, engines, trans-

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missions—detritus of The Great American Dream Machine. If the fields were a walking hazard at night, the main floor of that drafty old barn was a minefield of shin busters, even with the lights on.

A check at the window showed Charlie pointing to a spot inside the fenced compound facing the highway. He climbed into the passenger side of the tow truck. I was mildly curious about his trust of his customers, most of whom were the do-it-yourself type. Anyone could have walked in and . . .

The cash box was a plate-steel device welded to the shelf beneath the scarred steel counter. It was locked. Good boy, Charlie. Trust in Allah but tie your camel.

The two office compartments in back of the counter were about the size of those pigeonholes that car dealers provide for their salesmen. The larger of the two cubicles was a litter of parts catalogues, greasy thumbprinted ledgers, sheafs of opened mail, and an ashtray with the remains of two cigars whose demise had been brought on more by drowning than fire. The desk drawers contained more of the same. An anachronism one might not expect of Charlie—if this were indeed his office—was a glass-front bookcase containing a pristine collection of Zane Grey novels. There didn't look to be a reprint among them.

The other office was much neater. Its walls boasted a couple of manufacturers' calendars illustrated in the new freedom mode. I wonder if they use compressed air to blow those things up. More likely just the artist's air brush.

A small tape recorder was in the center drawer of the desk. Under some clean industrial rags in the bottom drawer on the left side I found a gun. It was an efficient-looking little automatic of foreign make—a small-bore instrument, probably with a lot of muzzle velocity for its size. I put it back and covered it up with the rags when I heard Charlie through the weathered barn siding saying goodbye to the truck driver.

I just made it outside the counter when he walked in.

Charlie hustled in back of the counter and began burrowing in a parts catalogue. Around the side of the cigar he said, "Any luck?"

"I earned my hundred—the hard way."

He looked up. I took off my L. L. Bean porkpie hat and leaned over the counter.

"Fall into one of my wrecks?"

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I was feeling surly. It is a good thing my shoulder still ached, or I'd have reached across the counter and grabbed a handful of shirtfront.

"Yeah, I fell—into a trap, a setup. You better have some answers."

"I got a answer. You think I pay you a hundred bucks, then get somebody to unravel what I paid for? If you think that I need another detective."

"Your logic is impeccable. Then you tell me how two thugs knew I was going to be in your graveyard last night?" I told him the story.

"You think whoever it was knew you were coming?" Charlie's cigar sagged. "I didn't talk about it to anybody."

"No other way. They had to be in the field waiting. Maybe they lost sight of me while I wandered around in the dusk, but they sure found me right after I turned on my flashlight."

"Why?"

It was the question I had heard most often from my clients in 15 years in the business. I wasn't always able to answer it, but this time I blinked over Charlie Hake's bland obtuseness.

"Because they want me to go away—far away."

"Then you just go back tonight and catch them. This time don't sleep in the back of no Corvairs."

"Charlie, I like you. More particularly I like the color of those fifties. But think a minute. Those boys know your Detroit-decorated landscape well enough to prowl it blindfolded. I don't. There are hundreds of places to hide, for them as well as me. And the next time I might not have a flashlight that weighs three pounds."

I put my hat back on. "I want a list of everybody who works for you. Names, addresses—the works. Everything you can tell me about each one."

"Names? Yeah. Addresses? A couple. I don't keep the best records. I got only two steadies besides me and my brother. The rest are part-timers who hang around. Sometimes when I get a little rushed I give them a few bucks to go out in the fields and strip parts. Sure, they steal a little, but nothing like what I've been missing lately."

"Maybe they learned to like it. If they have, they need a market. I'll look into that. Who was in here yesterday when you hired me?"

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"Here? In the building? Nobody. Just me and you." A dribble of juice showed around one side of the cigar. Charlie let fly into a cardboard box behind the counter. I bet he could hit a cockroach at seven paces.

"Which office is yours?"

He pointed to the one with the Zane Grey library. "The other one is where my kid brother is supposed to keep the books. Bobby—some kid. He's twenty-eight, had seventeen jobs, and never did a lick of work on any of them—and that goes for the four months he's been here."

At first I was going to say something about the gun, but that would mean explaining my searching the desks without permission.

"How about when you first called me? Anybody hear you?"

"I don't remember." Charlie withdrew the cigar and daintily plucked a strand of wrapper from his tongue with a greasy thumb and forefinger the color of ripe olives. "People going in and out most of the time."

After saying my farewell I went out into the fields to find the Corvair. The weeds and grass were well matted from the previous evening's exercise. In a couple of minutes I found the heavy wrench and the rag which had held it. The wrench already had faint rust spots from the rain.

I spent the rest of the day at auto graveyards, used-parts places, and small independent garages—largest customers for used parts. The first $50 bill, which I had broken at a bank early in the afternoon, was nearly used up when I thought I saw a small pattern emerging. I really hit a nerve 40 miles away at a good-sized used-parts outlet near the town of Castor. My five bucks was well spent on a thin nervous individual who told me he had been buying parts from " . . . *some big guy. I don't know his name.*"

"You kept a record?"

He hesitated, then shook his head.

"No receipts? No sales tax-exemption form on file? Nothing?"

Thin and nervous tugged at a wispy mustache. "No." He paused. "Dammit, you're not from the state, are you?"

"Relax. The state doesn't pass out fins. They take them in. What was this person driving?"

"A Ford pickup. Maybe a '71 or '72."

"And you never asked where he gets his parts—all those transmissions, starters, things like that?"

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Nervous was getting more nervous. "Look. Don't make trouble for me. I told you all I know. People think this is an easy business. It's a tough way to make a dollar. When I can buy things I need at a price, I buy."

"Right," I said. "I burn no candles for the state. But if you are buying stolen parts, some day the guy they were stolen from may come in here. If he does, he will be accompanied by guys who ride in cars with flashing red lights. He's going to be angry. Count on it. The guys in the cars with the lights won't be angry. They'll be quiet and polite. But oh boy will they be determined to have their way."

I walked out leaving him to tug his mustache over that. I think he was sorry he took the five.

I went home, made a deviled ham and sharp-cheese sandwich, washed it down with a Löwenbräu, and took a nap.

When I woke up it was dusk. The lights in the village of Hammond where I have lived since I gave up chasing stories for newspapers were just coming on. Some of my neighbors had mowed their lawns, but I had slept right through all that buzzing. The sweet-sour odor of freshly cut grass came through the open window of my bedroom. Outside I could hear kids laughing and the clatter of a bike dropped on the sidewalk.

I put on a pair of charcoal slacks and a loose dark-blue sports shirt. I left the shirt out of the slacks to cover my gun. Then I drove out to Charlie Hake's.

While I drove I plugged in a Mantovani tape for background. It helped me think. Cars. The whole heart and soul of the American economy and the American way of life. Look what happens when gas gets scarce. Instant panic. And think of the way it all starts, all too often in those little pigeonholes that office car salesmen have. Close that door. Get the customer in the chair. Keep asking for the order. Ask what color he likes. Tell him yes, there's a blue with white interior right on the lot—let's write it up. Finance? No problem. And all of it is recorded on tape in a back room for replaying the next morning for the sales manager's daily post-mortem—those tough, slashing, bloodletting sessions which only the hardiest and most calloused auto salesman can survive for long.

Sure. Tape. Suddenly I had a yearning to see if there was anything in that tape recorder I found at Charlie Hake's. I turned off Mantovani and drove a little faster.

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It was dark and the stars were out when I drove off the road and parked among Charlie's veterans of the highway wars. The rust and dents in my car made a perfect camouflage. If Charlie spotted it, he might send it to the crusher right away. It lowered the tone of his establishment.

Getting into the barn was easy. The back door facing the fenced compound surrendered gracefully to a plastic credit card. I closed the door on a book of matches to keep the wind from blowing it open and to hold the latch in case I needed to leave in a hurry. That was my undoing. If I had let the lock click I would have heard him use the key to come in.

He made less noise than a fog rolling in. He jammed the gun into my ribs so hard it felt as if he had already shot me. I wondered why it didn't go off from that. My hand was still in the desk drawer. The gun was gone, so that would be the automatic in my back.

"Your move," I said.

"Straighten up slow and put both hands on the desk." He sounded a little scared. But there was no way he could be as scared as I was.

"Why don't you turn on a light, Bobby?" If he was going to usher me out of the office I did not want to walk through that minefield in the main part of the barn and go to my grave with barked shins.

He switched on the desk lamp. Bobby did not look 28. He looked more like 18. But there was no mistaking he was Charlie's brother—the same long-jawed look, same sandy hair, same gray eyes.

"Out." He motioned to the office door, which stood opened out toward the counter opposite the cash box. As I went through I touched it lightly with my hand to open it farther. It moved easily. I counted on Bobby being close behind me, but not close enough for me to turn and chop at his gun hand.

In one swift motion—as swift as a middle-aged guy who hopes he still has some roses to sniff can make it—I hooked the edge of the door with my right heel, yanked hard, and dropped to the floor. The little automatic made a surprisingly loud noise. I rolled to the right and drew my Smith & Wesson.

Scared people without much experience in tense situations do funny things. Bobby came through the doorway slowly, looking down as if he expected to find me dead on the floor. This time I

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gave him the door with 192 pounds of push. It slammed against his head with a hollow booming sound that reverberated in the cavernous barn. I don't know how it felt to him but it sure felt good to me. The gun went off as it flew out of his hand, the shot hitting the cash box and ricocheting between the steel shelf and counter top.

By the time Bobby came around enough to sit up and hold his head between his hands, I had Charlie on the phone at home. I had the tape recorder from Bobby's desk on the counter when he walked in ten minutes later.

Most people show on their faces what they feel inside. It's a barometer a detective learns to read early. Charlie said nothing, not even hello. But the expression he wore was 60-40 anger and disappointment. That left nothing over for surprise.

"Let's listen to little brother's tape machine, Charlie. I haven't tried it yet." I punched the play button. Rock and roll poured out.

Hell's bells.

Charlie stared at me.

Bobby came to life when the music started.

"Who is this hotshot? I caught him in the office going through my desk. What's going on? He tried to kill me."

I checked Charlie's barometer. It read the same as mine—confusion. If my hunch was wrong, this would take some convoluted explaining.

"Got any answers, Ringhorn?" Charlie said. The music played on.

"Yeah. This for one. Little brother tried to test the effectiveness of my life insurance." I laid the automatic on the counter, then reached over to lower the volume on the tape recorder. Before I could touch the dial, the rock gave way in mid-beat to the sound of voices—Charlie's and mine. My sigh of relief was almost enough to drown out the tape. I turned up the volume.

Tape recorders amaze me. Nobody thinks he sounds in real life the way he sounds on tape. Charlie's long jaw sagged when he heard, "I got the best cars. That's why I get hit." For a few minutes the tape played routine shop sounds, a customer coming in and the like. Then came another interlude of music, followed by a record of my second visit with Charlie. The sound on tape of Charlie squirting tobacco juice into the box behind the counter said something for fidelity on a small recorder. That baritone snarl was me all right.

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The tape was playing the part where Charlie was telling me his kid brother had 17 jobs and worked at none when Bobby lunged for the gun. I'd noticed Charlie had picked up a machinist hammer and was tapping the counter nervously while the tape played. Bobby's hand and Charlie's hammer reached the gun nearly at the same time. The hand got there first.

I still don't know if Charlie meant to bust the hand or the gun. The meaty splat of the hammer on the back of Bobby's hand is something I won't forget soon. Nor will I forget his scream.

Between moans Bobby told us the name of his partner—a big man who owned a '72 Ford pickup. I wrote down the address.

"I'll call the sheriff," Charlie said, moving to the phone.

"I wasn't sure you'd press charges, Charlie. I'm sorry your brother is in this, but I think it's bigger than both of us. I'm not happy about what the two of them tried to do to me last night, or for that matter what Bobby had planned for me tonight." I turned to Bobby. He was too busy hurting to notice.

When Charlie finished the call he turned to me. "Stop in tomorrow. I'll give you the other hundred I owe you, plus your expenses."

I fingered the Band-Aid on my head. "I don't charge for my medical expenses. Besides, I wasn't thinking about money. I was just wondering if the sheriff ever had two boarders in the county jail at the same time with broken right hands."

"Q"

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 491st "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . the story of three city toughs and one country man and the deadly duel they fought on the country man's home grounds . . .

The author, Joshua Draper, is in his late forties, married, and the father of three tall sons. He is an aircraft engineer who, in spare time, enjoys handcrafting furniture. But his "main hobby is reading, reading, reading."

Of the thirty or more short stories Mr. Draper has written in the past dozen years, all but six, he says, were "thrown out," and of the six he submitted for publication, "The Third Choice" represents his first acceptance, his "breaking into print." Admire that man's persistence and determination!—it's a lesson to all of us . . .

THE THIRD CHOICE

by JOSHUA DRAPER

It was late on a cool April afternoon when I slid my tired frame into the ancient pickup, left the graveyard after one more look at the cold gray stone surrounded by the yellow daffodils my wife had favored, and headed home to Stoutinville where Alice and I had lived eight happy years together.

The drive home was through open farmland and scattered patches of forest. This part of the state used to be beautiful—Alice had loved it—but it was heavily scarred now by the high-piled stony remnants left by strip-mine operators.

By the time I'd reached the edge of town and stopped at Lee Bent's gas station I'd about gotten over the depression and smoldering hatred that always fills me when I go into the city. Lee was out front and lifted a friendly hand in greeting as I drove into position by the pumps. I cut the engine and eased out of the cab

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as a black limousine I'd noticed behind me on the way home rolled up on the other side of the pumps. There were three men in it and the sight of them dulled the edge of my returning good mood. Arrogant city toughs, all three of them.

Two were in their middle twenties, wearing the long hair and colorful clothing now fashionable in the metropolitan areas. The third man, sitting alone in the back, was older—55 or 60 perhaps. All were unsmiling, almost expressionless. The two young men got out and stood sentinel fashion, one on each side of the car. They scrutinized Lee and me intently, squinting against the late afternoon sun. The man in the back, dressed more sedately than his companions, was oblivious of everything.

One of the young men, making an accurate guess, turned to Lee. "Fill it with high-test." The words were spoken in a tight-lipped command. He expected immediate compliance.

Lee nodded to the man and while walking toward my truck said, "There's a customer ahead of you."

I had a bad feeling about the trio and I saw the speaker's face harden. I blurted out, "I'm not in a hurry, Lee. Gas them up."

Lee hesitated, but after a glance at me he spun around, walked to the rear of the limousine, and began to fill the tank.

The spokesman gave me a flint-eyed appraisal and said softly, "Thanks, old man."

It was a remark calculated to emphasize the difference in our ages and therefore in our physical abilities. Repressed anger and a sharp disgust made my hands quiver slightly. The city tough saw the shaking and misread its cause. I managed to ignore him.

Lee finished filling the limousine and hung up the nozzle. Silently the talker checked the pump and pulled out a roll of bills. He peeled off two and laid them in Lee's hand. They got into the limousine and drove off without waiting for their change. I figured—incorrectly—that was the last I'd see of them.

I gassed the pickup myself, paid Lee, and headed home. My place—a farm left to me by my parents—was a mile farther down the highway and a mile and a half back through a narrow valley on a dead-end road.

Alice and I had lived here for the few years we'd had. Until she was killed by a stray bullet fired by a criminal fleeing from a robbery that netted him exactly $3. Both she and I had liked the quietness and the semi-isolation. I guess that's why I continue to stay here.

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I parked the truck in front of the shed and took the groceries I had on the front seat into the house. I rushed through the barn chores—doing the milking and feeding the cows and pigs. The chickens I left for later. There was an hour or so of daylight remaining and I wanted to do a little fishing. I threw my rod and tackle box into the pickup and drove out to the pits.

The back acres of the farm had been ruined during the '40s when my father had sold the mineral rights. The land had been ripped up without regard for conservation or reclamation. The soil and stony shale that had overlain the coal had simply been piled up in huge haphazard mounds as the miners had scooped out the black wealth. The abandoned pits—long trenches really—had soon filled with water. Somehow the bass and perch had gotten in and managed to thrive.

The water in the pits was cold, cloudy, and very deep. After some years, algae had sprouted and now the surface was dotted with great globs of the slimy green stuff. Wide curving bands of it hung down beneath the globs, disappearing into the motionless murky depths.

At one low point I'd picked and shoveled a crude stairway down the steep banks to the water. This particular spot, where I kept a rowboat, was a hundred feet wide and at least that much in depth. It stretched away on each side for a thousand feet before turning out of sight.

At the edge of the mine I parked the truck and hiked into the pit. I went down the stairway carefully and stashed my fishing gear in the boat. In the cool quietness I heard a murmuring of voices and I went back up to check it out.

I've always discouraged youngsters from coming here, not that I don't like kids, but it's just too dangerous for them. This time it wasn't kids. It was the three city toughs and their black limousine. Some inner voice told me to be silent.

They'd driven in close to the edge of the pit and the old man watched as the two young men tusseled with a heavy burden. It had the appearance of a body wrapped in burlap bags and bound with wire. The two staggered with it to the edge and with a coordinated swing threw the bundle over. It bounced and slid into the water with a chunking splash, then sank immediately.

I'd been transfixed, watching their furtive disposal, and had stood there unmoving. After seeing their bundle vanish, the men turned back to their car. One of them saw me and shouted. The

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shout galvanized me into a frantic scramble.

I couldn't return to the boat—there was no place to hide in it. I scurried behind one of the shale piles as a shot was fired. When a bullet rips through the air it carries with it a shock wave and if it passes over your head the shock wave strikes your ear and it sounds as if the gun was inches away from your head. I'd heard the same sound before, long ago, in Korea. Now, as then, it propelled me into faster action than I ever realized I could muster. I could hear them pursuing me, cursing and slipping and sliding on the loose shale.

Running in the sharp-edged shale was reckless, an invitation for a lacerated or broken ankle, but I had to keep ahead of them. I cut to the side and took the shortest route. The shale mounds ended against uneven pastureland that ran bare and open up to my house. Halfway across I crested a small hill on a dead run. I broke stride to look back and saw one of the men run out of the mine. He called for his partner and shot at me. This time the slug didn't pass over my head. I felt a heavy blow and stumbled into a sliding heap on the damp grass. I'd been hit above the knee on the outside of the leg.

I laid there only an instant, then got to my feet with difficulty and staggered off. My leg dragged a little but I crossed the remainder of the open ground and reached the shed. With dismay I remembered my truck was back at the mine.

I left the shed no more than two minutes ahead of them. I hobbled across the yard and went around the barn to the far side. I was in a field that was soggy from spring rain. There was a slight rise about 30 yards away. I scrambled over that until I was out of sight and fell down to rest.

The sun was setting. If I kept hidden until dark I had a chance of getting away. If that pair ever caught me I was a dead man.

I tore off a piece of my shirt and rolled it into a wad. Using my handkerchief, I tied it down over the wound. The pain slackened some and the bleeding slowed but didn't stop.

They were checking the house and the outbuildings. Their angry shouts came to me clearly in the deepening dusk. I inched up to the top of the rise on my stomach. They were talking excitedly. One of the men went back toward the mine, running hard. The other man stayed, looking around carefully, gun in hand. He needn't have worried. The effort of running and getting shot had left me winded and shaking.

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The last of the sun slid below the horizon and with the vanishing sun went the warmth. A few yards away was a small haystack I'd thrown up last fall. On top of it was an old canvas tarp. Keeping both eyes on the gunman, I snaked over to the stack. Slowly and quietly I untied the tarp and pulled it free. It smelled of hay and mildew. I wrapped it around myself like a cape.

The lone gunman was still patrolling the yard, stopping often to listen. His actions were stupid. He'd take a few steps, then suddenly whirl around, hoping to catch me. He wasn't in his city, in his familiar environment. If he'd been hunting a quarry that was unhurt and armed he'd have been taken out at once.

A double cone of brightness came along the road and the big limousine crunched over the gravel in my driveway. The reinforcements had arrived. The car jerked to a stop and the other two men got out. The three stood in a close group—another mistake—talking heatedly.

From the trunk of the limousine they produced a pair of flashlights. The two young men moved out, beginning a search. They moved with confidence, knowing I was hurt and nearby. Unlike them I was on familiar ground. Somehow I had to use that against them.

One man skirted the barn going around the side opposite my position. My cows had the habit of spending the night there, close to water and feed. Ten or twelve of them trotted around the corner of the barn and up the rise toward me, disturbed by the stranger. Close behind the cows came the gunman, swinging his flashlight in wide arcs.

I squirmed around on the moist ground until the herd was between us. The city tough was alert and, I hoped, jumpy. I dropped the tarp and held it in both hands by one edge.

When he was looking away from me I lurched to my feet, yelled hoarsely, and in the same instant flapped the tarp in the faces of the nervous beasts. They wheeled in a panic, bawling with fright, and stampeded over the gunman. He had time for one startled yelp before he was flung to the ground with a loud thud. The cows trampled over him.

His flashlight lay on the ground, still shining. The man's partner, attracted by the commotion, called to him. When he received no answer on the second try he retreated slowly, walking backward. His roving light played over me once, but I was down on the ground again with the tarp hiding me.

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The odds were now a bit better. But I wasn't ready to be optimistic yet. There were still two of them and both were unhurt. I held my knee in both hands trying unsuccessfully to squeeze out the pain. This had to be ended soon or I wasn't going to come out the winner. I felt like an hourglass with the sands about to run out.

The second gunman went back to the car to confer with the boss man. I got up and limped into the barn. It was warmer inside and I was glad to get off the wet earth. In the darkness I groped my way to the door that opened on the house yard. It was propped open with a brick. I could see them standing by the car, holding the flashlights, making good targets of themselves. I eased the tarp to the floor and picked up the brick.

The were whispering and shaking their heads, evidently unable to agree on how to proceed. With more caution than I had ever exercised in my life, I stepped through the door, planted my feet firmly, and threw the brick with all the power I could generate. It was a good throw, catching the boss man above the ear. He fell full-length without a sound.

The remaining gunman had quick reflexes. He got off a fast shot at the doorway. I'd expected that and had already dived inside the barn, hitting the concrete floor hard enough to get some skin burns. I heard him running toward me. I jumped up and braced myself by the door. Gauging his footsteps, I timed a hard punch that landed in his stomach as he came through the door. His breath whooshed out and he folded, collapsing with a groan.

I hit the light switch and as he tried to get up I caught him on the jaw with a roundhouse blow that was fueled by all the anger that had been simmering in me for two years. He fell in a loose heap. His fancy clothing was mussed by the barn-floor litter. I grabbed some cord I use to tie grain sacks and bound the unconscious man tightly. Leaving him there I checked on the boss man. He was attempting awkwardly to get on his feet. I'd brought along some cord for him. I pushed him into the back seat of the limousine and trussed him quickly.

The man in the barnyard was dead—one of the cows had stepped on his neck. I left him there and went into the house to take care of my leg. The makeshift bandage had stuck. I soaked it off and washed out the wound with peroxide. With a real bandage in place I changed into some dry clothes. My leg was beginning to stiffen but other than that I felt a lot better.

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I returned to the barn, untied the man's legs, and shoved him out to the car. He fell through the door, so I left him there and retied his legs. The boss man was partly conscious and muttering—nothing to worry about from him. The dead man I dragged to the car and rolled into the trunk.

I paused for a short breather, then rechecked their bonds. I didn't want them to get loose while I was driving. I started the engine, backed the big car around, and took the road to town.

In a few minutes the boss man became fully conscious and quickly understood his situation. He ranted and raved for several minutes until his strength and voice gave out. Then he became Mr. Reasonable and tried to convince me I could do myself a rich favor by setting him free. I didn't even bother to answer.

Finally the two of them still alive got desperate and their talk took a different approach—threats. I ignored them until they made one threat that reached me.

In a voice that was raspy with effort and emotion the boss man said, "Look, sodbuster. You'd better think of this. If you turn us in neither you nor anyone in your family will be safe. Someone will blow them away, you can depend on that."

Now that was a thing to consider. I wondered if he would have made that particular threat if he knew his sort had already caused the death of my wife. I didn't doubt they could make good the threat, even from prison. I hit the brakes, stopped and turned the limousine around.

In a few minutes I came to the turnoff—the same one they'd used themselves a little earlier. They were silent at first and then as the big machine began to bounce over the rocky road they got the idea.

I killed the headlights and drove back into the mine to a spot where I could bring the car right up to the edge of a slope over the deepest part of the pit. The pair in the rear of the car began yelling and thrashing around, kicking up an incredible fuss.

I got out, leaving the driver's door open. I reached in, let off the brake, and at the same time threw the gear into drive. The heavy machine rolled down the shaly slope ponderously, gathering speed. It shot off the edge, falling silently for 50 feet and hit the dark water with the noise of a bomb. The impact threw up a tremendous geyser. I felt the spray on my face.

I stood there and listened to the wash of the disturbed water splashing on the shoreline. A thick stream of bubbles made a vio-

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lent churning for several minutes, then gradually lessened and died. Even in the darkness I could see a great roil of muddy water rise to the surface. It would settle by morning.

I went down to the rowboat and retrieved my fishing gear. The walk under the stars to the pickup was pleasant, the tension of the past hours relieved. It was invigorating to breathe the cool crisp night air.

Their big mistake was not realizing they were out of their element. To their way of thinking I had only two choices—turn them in or turn them loose. They never thought of my third choice.

DETECTIVERSE

THE NAME OF THE GAME

by MARK GRENIER

When a murderer strikes without leaving a clue
In effecting his victim's departure,
Though the villain be arch, he is no match for Lew,
For Macdonald's detective is Archer.

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 492nd "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . "There is many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip" . . .

The author, Dennis Palumbo, is a graduate of the University of Pittsburgh. For two years he worked as an advertising copy writer in Louisville, Kentucky, then moved with his wife Judy to Los Angeles to "pursue a career as a TV writer and for one season was Story Editor on the ABC series, 'Welcome Back, Kotter.'" Besides old movies and early British blues, his chief interests are racquetball, reading, and "having lunch with other writers" . . .

MANY A SLIP

by DENNIS PALUMBO

Everyone was watching television that night, even Lieutenant Hugo Garth of Homicide. "No, sirree," he said, rubbing his hands, "I've never missed a single showing of *The Wizard of Oz*. Greatest movie ever made."

The Commissioner's nephew spread cheese on a cracker and laughed. "Why, Garth, you old softie—who'd suspect that Dorothy and Toto were cherished guests in your crusty household?"

"You can save your wisecracks for—"

The phone rang. The two men looked at each other. Then Garth answered the phone and frowned . . .

A half hour later they were in the apartment of Ronald Haas. He'd just been murdered with the proverbial blunt instrument; his color TV set was on, and a cup of coffee on his kitchen table was untouched.

"Haas was watching TV in the living room," the Commissioner's nephew mused, piecing the events together, "then went to the kitchen to make some coffee. He must have heard sounds in

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the living room. He left the cup of coffee on the kitchen table, came in, met the intruder, and was killed."

"Next-door neighbor discovered the body," Garth said absently. He glanced at the TV screen. Nobody had bothered to turn it off; Dorothy and the Scarecrow had just encountered the Tin Woodman. "The only lead we have is the victim's business partner—a guy named Sanchez."

They found Peter Sanchez alone in his one-room studio apartment, sitting in front of a portable black-and-white set. Lieutenant Garth questioned Sanchez while the Commissioner's nephew watched the Cowardly Lion reel back fearfully in the face of the Wizard's smoke and fire. "I am Oz, the great and powerful . . . "

"I've only been in this country a few weeks," Sanchez said. "Haas and I became partners in Mexico and after I came here I realized it was a big mistake—"

"So you confirm the reports that you and Haas never got along, that you were always at each other's throat?"

Sanchez shrugged. "Business does this to people. But I did not kill him. I was here all evening watching the TV. I never had one before, so I watch it a great deal. I watch this Wizard movie." He grinned sheepishly. "It is good fun."

"You were here watching TV at the time Haas was killed?"

"Oh, yes. *The Wizard of Oz*, like I said. I remember thinking how strange it was—first there was no color when the little girl was on the farm, then it is color when she and the dog arrive in Oz land. Very—ah—clever."

"Everybody's a critic," Garth growled. "Okay. We'll be in touch." He turned to the Commissioner's nephew. "Ready?"

It wasn't until they had reached Police Headquarters that the Commissioner's nephew spoke of the crime.

"Sanchez?" Garth said. "Are you sure?"

"No question," the Commissioner's nephew replied. "He says he remembers there was 'no color when the little girl was on the farm.' He was referring to the fact that the film is in black-and-white until Dorothy and Toto arrive in Oz, from which point the film is in color. A very effective cinematic device—but there's just one problem: Sanchez has a black-and-white set. As far as he's concerned, the whole film would be in black-and-white. And remember, this was his first viewing of the film—he probably wouldn't have known in advance that the black-and-white shifted to color."

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"Then why did he say—?"

"It was just a slip. For Sanchez to have known *The Wizard of Oz* changed from black-and-white to color, he would have had to watch on a color TV set—"

"I get it," Garth said. "Haas's color set was on at the time he was murdered. Sanchez enters Haas's living room and waits for Haas to return from the kitchen. Since the tube is on, Sanchez instinctively glances at it from time to time—and sees the part where the film changes from black-and-white to color.

"Then to prove he was home watching the movie on TV at the time of the murder, he mentions the film, but he says something about it that he couldn't possibly have known had he been home watching a black-and-white set."

The Commissioner's nephew nodded. "None of this may hold up in court, but I wager you've got your man. Follow it up and you'll break the case." He looked at his watch. "Besides, Garth, you've got all the incentive in the world to nail him."

"Yeah?"

"Sure. Thanks to Peter Sanchez, you missed this year's showing of *The Wizard of Oz*."

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 493rd "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . A hitchhiker story—with a twist . . .

The author, Gerald Standley, is a Professor of Behavioral Studies and Philosophy at the University of Florida. He is just past sixty; he lists clocks and printing as his hobbies, and has "revered E. A. Poe since childhood." He has published a textbook in Symbolic Logic, a number of articles and reviews on the same subject, and has had "some poems published"; also, in "Workbench," the plans for a gearless clock . . .

ON THE ROAD

by GERALD STANDLEY

The drizzling twilight rain through which Dave was driving was not at all a match for his spirits. He was on a joyful holiday. It was only a short one, he would have to be home again after two days, and who else would call a state-wide Teachers' Convention a holiday? But for someone ten years into a marriage with a Daddy's girl who incessantly pointed out that the standard of living provided her was not that to which she was accustomed, just to be away from home was a pleasure.

Dave pulled over to pick up a hitchhiker.

"Where are you headed?" Dave asked him as he climbed in.

"Anywhere you're going. Just to be out of this soup is good enough for me."

As he accelerated, Dave glanced at his companion. He was about Dave's own size, had clothes that looked a little down-and-out, but an honest-looking face with eyes that met his quite openly.

"My name's Harvey Newman."

Dave held out his hand. "Dave Cox."

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"You know something, Dave, we look a good deal alike—in the face, I mean."

"Lucky me, poor you!" replied Dave. "What do you do?"

"Oh, just about anything I can get paid for. I've a good reference in my pocket from a preacher in Orlando. I try to turn an honest buck whenever I can."

"And when you can't? A less-than-honest one if necessary?"

The man beside him laughed easily. "Never been booked yet! Except a few times for vagrancy."

"Married?"

"Single. What about you?"

"Married, but no kids." There were a few moments of silence. "Are you going far, or somewhere around here?"

"I figure on going up north into Kentucky. Maybe Ohio."

"I'm due at Tallahassee for a Teachers' Convention at nine in the morning. I'm thinking I should stay overnight in some little town where the rates are lower and finish the trip tomorrow early. If you're still around, I'll be glad to take you that far—to Tallahassee, I mean."

"I'd be glad to wait," was the reply. "This rain is no good for getting rides anyway. Especially after dark."

"Then keep your eye open for a motel and restaurant that doesn't look too expensive, and we'll both save money by splitting the bill if you want to."

Long pause.

"Look, man, I hate to admit it, but I haven't any money."

It was said quietly. *Very smooth*, thought Dave, *so darn smooth I wonder if it could be the truth*.

"You're putting me on!"

"I wish I were."

"Tell you what," said Dave at length. "Show me your wallet and if it really doesn't have a single bill in it, I'll pay for supper, the night's lodging and breakfast, then let you off in Tallahassee."

The wallet was promptly produced and opened. It was empty.

"Look for low-cost housing," Dave sighed. "I'm only a schoolteacher myself."

Before long they found it. Nearby was the Carson Restaurant. Dave paid for the night and signed in: Dave Cox—Harvey Newman—friend—Tallahassee, Florida—Teachers' Convention—Pinto —1D 3287.

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The woman rose to pick up the card and Dave saw then that she was soon to have a baby. She looked at the card casually.

"You a teacher?"

"That's right."

"What grade?"

"Sixth."

"Better not let anyone know it," she smiled. "You'll get shanghai'd here in Carson."

"Indeed?"

"Sixth grade is what I teach and I was supposed to be replaced a week ago. Today was absolutely my last, and Pokey—he's our principal—will have to take it himself, it looks like. There's no substitute in the county that will touch it. You know how sixth grade is."

Dave nodded and expressed his hope that someone would show up.

"I hope so, too. Mr. Pokey already has all he can do, poor guy!"

A few minutes later at the table, Dave asked Harvey if school teaching was among the odd jobs he accepted.

"Lord, no!"

"Just asking. Seems they've got an opening here in Carson. I doubt if it pays much, but then it's the kind of job there's not a lot of competition for."

Dave tossed for a few moments before falling asleep. His habit had always been to devote a few minutes, quite unwillingly, to running over the most recent causes for worry. That house they had just bought—forty-eight thousand and they couldn't afford a third of that! And she'd go on talking forever as if her father were buying it, just because they had borrowed from him instead of from the bank. And was Dave responsible for his salary being so meager? She knew when she married him that he was a schoolteacher.

Sometime later he sleepily noticed a light in the bathroom.

And what seemed like an hour or two later he half awoke again. Then he found himself sharply awake, with the queer feeling that something was awry. Rising on one elbow he looked at the other twin bed. It was empty. There was no light under the bathroom door. He climbed out of bed and switched on the light, then switched it off again to look out of the window. His car was gone.

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He reached for the phone, but apparently nobody was attending the switchboard at that hour. He decided to look for a pay phone, but his clothes were gone.

Harvey's clothes were there. He held them up against himself. A fair fit. A few coins jingled. He looked for the wallet. It was still empty. The identification card read *Harvey Newman*. Beneath it were some credit cards: *David Cox*. They were all there.

"He's no fool," Dave said aloud. "Any use of credit cards would leave a trail behind him."

Dave put the clothes on. *Thank God they're fairly clean*. He was putting the wallet into his pocket when he suddenly sat down. He sat for a long time, thinking.

At eight o'clock Dave reached for the phonebook.

"Mr. Pokey, someone told me you're looking for a sixth-grade teacher. I was wondering if I could come by this morning and talk to you. My name is Harvey Newman."

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DEPARTMENT OF SECOND STORIES

Elizabeth McCoy's first story, "Henry's Eighth," appeared in the October 1977 issue of EQMM. The author, you will recall, is a member of John Ball's creative-writing class in Encino, California. They call themselves the "Alpha" group, the name chosen by the students and meaning not "beginning"—as in Alpha to Omega—rather "first" (Alpha is the first letter in the Greek alphabet)—first in the sense of "best." It is a noble word, a noble aim, and your Editor's educated guess is that we will hear more from the members of the Alpha group.

In the meantime here is Elizabeth McCoy's second story, and considering that it is only her second appearance in print, we can't help remarking how well she writes, and with what perceptive touches . . .

HEART'S DESIRE

by ELIZABETH McCOY

It was the next to the most important day of the year for Homer Thompson, and nothing was going to spoil it for him. Not being reorganized out of his job at the office. Not the raise in the mortgage interest or the need for four new tires and a radiator job. Above all, not anything of any description that Myra could think up or do to him to prevent his rendezvous on this day of days with her hated rival.

The NFL playoff game was to start at 10:00 A.M.; the AFL playoff at 1:00 P.M. He was up at 5:00 to forestall Myra on any chore that she could devise for him. Joe Willie, the tattered ginger tom with the stiff rear leg, came stretching and yawning out of his innertube bed in the corner of the garage to join him.

He mowed the lawn while the trace of frost was still a silver sheen over it and the grass clung in wet gobs to the mower blades. Sometimes, just before the sharp blades bit into a new

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lane of grass, he would seem to see Myra's doughy face shimmering there on the surface.

"*I do not like the brown suit on you, Homer. It's too expensive and it makes you look insignificant. We will take the blue.*" Whirrrrrrrr.

But there was her face again, in the strip under the tree. "*Golf with that Ted Barbison—that's ridiculous! The two of you go over there and hit a ball a couple of times and then drink the rest of the afternoon. Why, his wife tells me he only owns one club. Don't interrupt me.*" The blades mowed off all but what looked like one ear.

Aha, there it was again, the face that sank a thousand hopes, there in that ragged patch beside the garage. "*I don't ever want you to bring either of those creatures here again, Homer, to waste time watching football. That Mortimer man smokes up my drapes. And Larry Barnes—you know perfectly well what that little snip of a wife of his said about me.*" Not even an ear survived the last thrust.

He trimmed the borders briskly and brought the hedges into line with a few well-placed lunges with the clippers. Myra would sleep late, as always, with the stoppers in her ears, the chin strap, and the sponge-rubber curlers. She needed a lot of sleep. It was 7:00 o'clock.

The maples were still shedding a few bright leaves. He raked them into a neat pile in the gutter. Joe Willie rolled ecstatically in it, and when Homer picked him up and threw him halfway across his shoulder he could hear the deep whiskey rumble of the cat's purr, and feel its tremor of delight along the side of his neck. He set fire to the leaves, and they stood together sniffing the rich fragrance—until Homer imagined for a moment that he saw in the spirals of the rising smoke, facing each other, the substantial wraiths not only of Myra but of her chinless sister as well.

"*He's crazy, Rose Marie. You wouldn't believe what a struggle it is just to try to keep Homer's feet on the ground. Football! He is glued to that television set from September until spring. I thought I could make him face reality by being very firm about seeing shows of my own when the games are on, but he got an old set and put it up in the basement. Do you know, he makes up plays for those teams—he actually does, on paper. And he talks to the players out loud during the game, telling them what they should be doing—talks right into the television screen. And nights he lies awake*

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worrying about their knees. He couldn't care less about my knees, but some football player up in Minnesota—would you believe that, Rose Marie?"

And just as one smoke tendril vanished upward came Rose Marie's snuffle, *"Well, Papa always said you married beneath—"* He dispersed the last of the smoke with a few stabs of his broom. It was 7:30.

Homer brought out the garbage cans to the edge of the driveway for collection. The big gray one reminded him of Myra. His arms went just about the same distance around it as they had gone around her, the last time they had been around her—some time ago. It was quite a load today because Joe Willie was sitting on top of the lid for the whole trip, and when Homer set it down Joe Willie remained there, his stiff hind leg sticking straight out while he worked at cleaning a particularly disreputable patch of fur on his underbelly. Myra's voice seemed to linger above the garbage can without benefit of vision.

"I don't care where he followed you home from or how hungry he is. You are not to feed him. They stay when you feed them. I will not have that cat in this house or anywhere on this property. He's a disease carrier. All animals are disease carriers. But especially this—this—ugh—just look at him!"

Joe Willie looked up from his grooming for a moment, as if he too could hear the voice. It was 8:05 A.M.

Homer swept out the garage and then checked the neatness of the items stored on the shelving along the walls. As always when he touched them, the pile of broken ice-hockey sticks from Gerald's abortive college days 20 years ago fell in a jumble on the floor. Squatting to try to make an orderly stack of the splintered pieces—how in hell could even Gerald break eight sticks in one season?—Homer heard the ghost of the omnipresent voice. *"You don't have to answer a rude question like that, Gerald. It ill becomes Homer to try to belittle my brother's accomplishments in sports when he has none of his own. Of course you can keep your sticks in the garage as long as you please, Gerald. Do you hear that, Homer, as long as he pleases."*

From somewhere behind his innertube bed, Joe Willie was scratching something out. It was the football Homer had bought for Barney. Weekends used to be different for a while when Barney came over. Such a bright, eager little boy. He'd got the football for Barney's birthday. But then Barney'd never come over

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again after Myra told his mother he was pestering Homer. *"Why should you be free baby-sitter for that little trollop while she runs out on dates with the boy friends? Widow indeed! I don't think there ever was a husband."*

He tossed the ball from one hand to the other. "Dammit, dammit, dammit!" The soft intensity of it stopped Joe Willie in his tracks. He sat down staring at Homer, wide-eyed. "I'd give my—"

He went out of the garage and tossed the ball, very gently, over the fence. It would land in the grass at just about the spot where he had hung the swing for Barney. From the upstairs bathroom window every morning he could see Barney swinging there.

Picking up the pace now, he shoved Gerald's broken sticks up onto the shelf, bundled and tied the stacks of newspapers for the Boy Scout collection, patched the broken place in the back sidewalk, and put a new washer on the front-yard faucet. Then he sat back on his heels looking around to check any last forgotten chore.

"That about do it, Joe Willie?" he asked. The cat came over and honed himself on Homer's thigh, with a sound like a small buzz saw. The upstairs bathroom window slammed shut. Myra was rousing for the day. His watch read 9:37 and galvanized him into action.

He got a grocery bag from his car in the garage and loped up the sidewalk into the kitchen. Joe Willie didn't follow him; he went around the side of the house.

Homer retrieved a can of beer from the back of the refrigerator vegetable crisper, took a carton of milk from the shelf, and made his way down the basement stairs, closing the door carefully behind him.

Homer had endowed his haven in the purely functional cellar with a certain coziness. His big old-fashioned television set filled one corner. Facing it, backs to the stairs, were an ancient rocker-recliner that Myra had exiled from the upper world and—for the company that never came any more—an almost equally battered wingchair. Two small crates served as tables beside them. There was a standing lamp, plugged, like the television, into a hanging overhead socket, a remnant of shag carpeting on the floor, and a large brown-paper bag on its side on the carpet, open end facing the TV.

Homer went to the high window and opened it for Joe Willie, who leaped down, circled the room once, checking, then worked

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himself into the paper bag, a watchful eye on the chairs and TV. Homer laid out on one of the crates the beer and contents of the grocery bag—potato chips, a box of ginger snaps, two apples. On the other crate he put the clipboard and colored pencils he had taken from a cache on the window sill. He poured some milk into a chipped saucer and put it down near Joe Willie's bag. Then he sat down.

It was a moment of almost religious intensity, like the hush before the first notes of a great symphony swell forth and break in a wave over a rapt audience. Ah, the sweetness of anticipation, of drawing it out to the last exquisite second!

He bent to scratch Joe Willie in exactly the right spot behind the left ear, pulled the tab on the can of beer with a resounding pop, and gave himself deliciously to the worn softness of the old recliner. Then he reached out and turned on the television.

Nothing happened.

The little screen stared back at him blankly, grayly unresponsive. He turned it off and then on again. Nothing.

His mouth was suddenly dry. He took a sip of the beer and put the can back on the crate unseeingly. He got up and checked the cord where it went into the multiple-outlet socket overhead, moved it to another of the three outlets. Then he went back and tried the ON control again. No luck. He checked the aerial connection where he had brought it through the corner of the window, knowing all the while that this was irrelevant to the trouble. He jiggled the set gently, then gave it the sharp blow on the side that is Everyman's instinctive mechanical first aid. Nothing.

It was 10:12. They could be almost through with the national anthem by now—no real loss, he comforted himself, in view of the quality of most of the singers, but to miss the opening kickoff—

He ran up the stairs, Joe Willie following boldly, and through the kitchen, where Myra was pouring herself a cup of coffee. In the living room he switched on the big color set, waited for it to warm up. It didn't.

Myra stood in the doorway watching him. Her little eyes glittered. She could not be said to be smiling exactly; the corners of her mouth were folded in as neatly as an institutionally made bed. But there was a certain—not radiant, more phosphorescent—triumph in her shapeless face. He turned the knob off and on once more, with the same result.

"It isn't working, Homer," Myra said. "I can't even watch 'Edge

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of Ecstasy,' and Evelyn is having brain surgery on it today. I would have told you about it last night, but then you never listen to anything I say anyway."

The kickoff was over now. The bright jerseys were surging forward in the great green oval, charging, clashing, falling, reforming their ranks. The battle was joined—without him. There was a knot deep in his gut, hard as an iron fist.

He wiped sweat from his upper lip and went to the desk, dropped the phone book once and had to steady it and himself aganst the blotter pad. Joe Willie jumped, light as a leaf, onto the desk to look through the book with him. It was a measure of Myra's intoxication with victory that she paid no attention to him.

They found it finally—"Television Repair" and Joe Willie, who had been boxing the pages as they fluttered, clapped a motheaten paw on the page. The advertisement, partly under the paw, read: "Nick's TV Repair. Your Place or Mine. 24-Hour Service 7 Days a Week. Problem Cases Our Specialty."

Myra, leaning against the door jamb, said, "Anyone you could get to come out on a Saturday will be terribly expensive—and probably not very good—and a long, long time coming." Homer began to dial.

The voice that answered was vibrant with confidence. "I take it," the voice said when Homer had finished his stumbling recital, "that you're in a crisis situation over there right now. Correct, Old Son?" Homer nodded dumbly, but the voice seemed to get his answer anyway. "Be there in three shakes of a tail."

"Do you have far to come?"

"I never have far to come to any of my clients, Old Son. Just hang loose."

"They must be three-fourths of the way through the first quarter already," blurted Homer.

"Steady as you go, now. Nick is on the way."

When he hung up he felt better already, stronger, as if the voice had given him a transformation of its own zest. He closed the phone book, returned it to its place with a new dignity and control, and picked up Joe Willie.

"That cat," said Myra, "has something on its head. Probably mange. Which is catching."

"Never mind." Homer made a point of stroking the area in question. He could feel the growl coming up as the cat stared at Myra. "Where's the little radio?"

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"I lent it to Rose Marie."

She did smile then, a shadow of a leer, as she turned back into the kitchen.

He waited for Nick sitting in the car in the garage, with the garage door open so that he could see the truck the minute it pulled up in front of the house. Somewhere in the wiring of the car radio there was a short that made the sound go into a kind of sliding screech at frequent intervals. But he did gather that the Oscelots led by one point, 7 to 6, midway through the second quarter. Burfelfinch, the barefooted kicker from Tasmania, had missed his first conversion in 28 attempts.

During one of the longer screeches—just as Aaron Achew dropped back to pass on third down and 23—Homer, looking around him, realized that he had never sat in the car inside the garage like this before. Joe Willie was stretched along the top of the seat with his eyes closed, and his purr sounded like an idling motor, not too well tuned. With the door closed—it was the first time Homer had ever thought, without a sense of guilt, of murdering Myra.

The truck drew up with five minutes still to go in the half, and Homer was at the curb before the driver had killed the engine. Nick looked as he'd sounded, breezily confident. Thin and quick-moving, with hair, barbershop-quartette mustache, and eyes all the same warm sherry color, he wore a navy-blue windbreaker with *Nick's Service* in white letters on the back, and a rakishly tilted, striped ski cap.

"Mr. Thompson? Great time I made, wasn't it, Old Son?" He was down from the van in a flash, lifting out the black repair kit that spelled hope for Homer. "Just remember, Nick never keeps a client waiting. Lead on, my man."

They went in by the back door and across the kitchen in single file, Homer, Nick, and Joe Willie. Myra sat at the kitchen table reading the paper over more coffee. Only a nest of curlers and her eyes like gray pebbles were visible over the top of the second news section as they jogged past.

Nick took in the basement den with one radar-scanning glance.

"I'm not disturbed down here," Homer hastened to explain. "Myra, that is, my wife, always has a lot of programs she likes to watch on the set upstairs, so I—I got this—"

"Just so." Nick homed in on the bulk of the old TV set. "A fine

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instrument indeed. They don't make them like this any more." He examined the plug-in to the socket, the aerial wire coming through the window, and clucked his approval. He went around to the back of the set, bent for a moment, and came up with a raw-ended wire. "Well, now. Couldn't expect much action, could we, with the main power supply line cut"—he examined the end critically—"with a rather dull scissors, I'd say, and then both ends stuffed neatly back into the hole to cover up the job."

"I—I didn't even think to check the point of entry into the set. I—"

"Of course not. No nice guy would think of it." Nick rested his hands on the top of the TV as if it were a lectern and faced Homer earnestly. "Mr. Thompson, there has been mischief here, evil mischief. You may take it from me, an expert. Very bad vibes, indeed. Am I correct that this is Mrs. Thompson's handiwork?"

Homer sat down in the chair. He could not meet the sherry-colored eyes. "Well, I—guess so. But how did *you* know?"

"Mr. Thompson, Old Son, in my business I meet people at their worst."

"Can you fix it?"

He waved a reassuring hand. "Not to worry, Old Son. Nick can fix anything." He disappeared behind the set humming "The Saints Come Marching In." Small clankings of tools, a mild expletive, more clankings, and he popped into view again like a jack-in-the-box. "Done." He spread his hands, a happy conjuror, reached a long arm around the set, and turned the knob. After a moment of suspense the picture began to swim up onto the screen, the beautiful girls of halftime, scantily clad, with banners.

Homer sat transfixed, his face a child's on Christmas morning. "I can see all the second half. I'd given up."

"Right on, man. I told you Nick never lets a client down." He was putting tools back into the black repair kit. He slammed the lid down and looked around the basement once more. "You don't have much company down here."

"I used to—well, Myra doesn't like people tramping through—"

"Say no more, Old Son. Message received." They stared together for a moment at a rollicking crowd in a beer commercial. "Close game, that today. Great game it should be."

"Do you have another emergency call—right away?" asked Homer.

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"Matter of fact I don't. Mind you now, that's not usual. No slumps in my business. But I just happen to be free at the moment. And if I'm not out in the van to hear the office calling—well, I'm not likely to get another emergency call right away, am I? It just happens I've got a little something riding on the Oscelots. Wouldn't mind watching a bit of the action."

Homer beamed. He got up. "You wait here. Sit down. Please sit down. Back in a minute."

He went up the stairs two at a time and straight to the refrigerator. Myra lowered the paper to watch him.

"If you're looking for that can of beer that was hidden behind the orange carton," she said, "I threw it out. I don't want—" She stopped in mid-sentence as he dug a beer from the back of the vegetable crisper, slammed the refrigerator door shut, and started down the stairs, swinging the door shut behind him.

After a moment Myra heaved herself up from the table and went over to open the basement door. She called down, "That man, Homer, is undoubtedly charging by the hour, and if you're down there drinking and watching that game with him, you're an even bigger fool than I thought you were. He'll charge you a fortune."

Homer took a sip of his beer while Nick pulled the tab off his. "Will you?" Homer asked.

"Will I what?"

"Charge me a fortune."

"Well, I'm not cheap, Old Son. But not to worry. Nick only charges for services rendered. I'll bill you later—long time to pay."

They watched in companionable silence while two coaches said they were just going to have to fight harder in the second half. Joe Willie had come out of his paper bag and gone to sleep across Homer's foot.

"She really is the living end, you know, Old Son. Now that set upstairs—"

"You think she did the same thing to that?"

"Oh, no way, Old Son. She'd want to be able to sneak that on to watch her own programs. Probably unscrewed a fuse. It's appalling the nasty tricks even stupid people are learning these days from watching television. But now, you take a set like that—that third little gal from the right is sure stacked, isn't she?—a set like that could be very dangerous for an ignorant person fooling

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around it with tricks like that. You understand much about television?"

"Nothing."

"Well, in a nutshell wires could get crossed. Powerful charges could build up, what I might call—fatal charges—under certain circumstances."

Homer felt Nick looking at him, and he turned his head, feeling his heart lurch when his eyes met that tawny gaze. There was an innocent clarity about Nick's eyes, but no depth, like the celluloid eyes that are sewn on Teddy bears. Homer's throat closed. My God, he was as good as telling him that he was one of those hit men who killed people for hire. Maybe just as a sideline, if he could fix a set to—Homer dropped his glance to Nick's hand on the beer can, long, graceful, golden-furred—lethal?

The players were coming on the field for the second half. Above the thunder from the arena he could hear Myra thudding around in the kitchen above. "A power buildup like that—it would be—when she turned the set on?"

"That would be it, Old Son. Of course, one would want to be sure there were no regrets, too late. You strike me as sort of a gentle chap. Maybe—" He put his head to one side quizzically, debating. The din from the small screen was only background to Myra's flat monotone in his mind. *"You never could tell opportunity, even if it bit you. That's why they treat you like dirt at the office. Do you know they call you 'the waterboy' behind your back at the office? If you'd take advantage, even once in a while of the chances that come your way, like Gerald does, maybe you'd amount to something by this time instead of being—"*

With a great effort, as if his lids were heavy, heavy with sleep, he raised his eyes from Nick's hand to his face. Nick's eyes were not really shallow, he saw now. Far back in them points of light flickered, like candles seen in a distant room, through many doors. *"I've told you time and time again to seize opportunity when it comes, but no, you're too stupid. So here we are with nothing. I have to put up with—"*

Almost as if he were watching a stranger do it, Homer felt himself nodding. Nick grinned. He raised his beer can in a semi-toast, then suddenly pointed with it at the screen. "Willya look at that!" The silky drawl crackled with excitement. "Gordon's putting in the Samoan, Tiki Apopo, at tight end. Big as a redwood—and fast!"

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"Beautiful, beautiful!" Homer found he could swallow after all. He filled his lungs with a great gulp of air. The thrill of the game steadied him, rising in him now like a wind among leaves. A flush of warmth spread over the muscles of his shoulders. He wanted to leap up and pace. He wanted to shout out directions as the lines crashed and spread out on the field, to push, to drive— He reached for the clipboard and thrust it at Nick, eyes still on the screen. "Worked out a play here. With Apopo in, they might—see what you think, next break."

"Just so, Old Son. And now that I look at it, I think I can peak up that video—just—a—mite."

From the living-room window Myra watched the TV repairman going down the walk to his van, and smiled. Thought he was going to make another killing, didn't he, repairing the upstairs set—her set. Well, she'd scotched that fast. He couldn't have been at the set two minutes before she shooed him off. Hadn't even had time to find out that it was just a pulled plug in the tangle of plugs and sockets near the fireplace. Actually, he took the brushoff pretty well. Just smiled and sort of bowed. A smooth one, that. Not bad-looking, really. Something about him reminded you of Dr. Ducamier in "Tomorrow's Tears," something sexy, sort of electric about the eyes.

She turned away from the window, looking at her watch. Now she could plug the set in and turn it on. Might catch— In the other room she weeded out the right plug, put it into the wall socket. Back at the set she reached out to switch it on—and stopped, annoyed.

What in heaven's name was all that racket about? That man must have left the door to the basement open when he came up, and the noise coming from it was unbelievable, simply unbelievable. If Homer thought she was going to stand for that sort of disturbance, he had another think coming.

She marched into the kitchen. Just as she'd thought—the basement door was open. She barked down the stairs, "Homer! Homer!" Her voice was lost in the noise from the television below. He knew better than to do that. She went down the stairs, hanging tightly to the rail, flinching at every creak. Well, this did it. This time *no* one was going to be able to repair that old set.

The two chairs, backs to her, blocked her view, but not the blare from the television. The blood drummed in her temples with

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rage. She stalked around the two chairs to give Homer the ultimatum.

He wasn't there. Not in the recliner, not in the old wingchair. How could he have come upstairs without her knowing? That cat, that dirty orange cat, sat bolt upright in the middle of the recliner's torn seat, ignoring her, staring past her at the television screen. She slapped at the cat and it spat back at her, dropped off the chair, and streaked up the stairs. She turned to the television set.

The game was over. The roar of the crowd was faintly less, but still ear-splitting. The cameras played over crowds breaking across the field, a pretty girl in the stands hugging her man in victory delight. They panned to the players' benches, the straggling exit of the losers, the exuberant milling at the winners' bench. They were hoisting their coach to their shoulders, a hunched figure struggling to catch his balance. He turned his head. The camera zoomed in. The face filled the whole screen. Triumphant. The essence of all joy attained, the battle won. Happiness beyond the dream. Homer.

Homer! Myra stared, mouth open. Homer? The chipped front tooth, the scar on the cheekbone, that crazily uneven left eyebrow—it *was* Homer. She clawed at her throat for breath that would not come, and fainted.

Joe Willie caught up with Nick as he was putting his tool kit in the back of the van. He twined between Nick's legs, making soft knurling noises. Nick stooped to stroke him, slammed the van doors shut, and took a small black notebook from his windbreaker pocket. Writing against the back of the van, he entered across the columns: "Homer Thompson—Heart's Desire—Payment Due—" He paused. He pushed his ski cap up in thoughtful cogitation, then suddenly crossed out the whole entry and thrust the book back in his pocket. "Damn!" he said to Joe Willie. "I oughta be able to take a case once in a hundred years just for the hell of it."

He went around and opened the door on the driver's side. Joe Willie bobbed along behind him, making small mewing talk. Nick paused. "*Of course,* you'll miss him, Old Buddy. But be sensible. He couldn't have lived with himself for five minutes as a real wife-killer. We wouldn't want to have him conscience-stricken for the rest of his life over that impossible woman's demise. Not the type at all. On the other hand, did you *see* his face when he found

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himself in front of that winning bench? Yessiree, Nick's entitled to one on the house once in a while."

Joe Willie was still sounding off as he leaped up into the van after Nick, walked across his knees, and settled on the seat beside him. Nick fired up the engine.

"The coach he replaced, you mean?" Old Nick grinned. "He owed me. Payment overdue. A devilish time to collect, eh?" His laughter filled the van as he tramped on the gas and they took off in a screeching start.

"Q"

POLICEMAN'S BEST FRIEND

by John H. Dromey

Bloodhound: a dog that's worth every scent.
Bloodhound's job: felon smellin'.
Cheap watchdog: covered with "ticks," most of the time.
Cold nose: okay for dogs, but detectives could end up in the doghouse with "cold no's" (by refusing to stake out a supermarket from inside the meat locker).
Dog days: four-footed friends are welcome on the police force—otherwise, the force would have to work without "paws."
Flood hound: a pup that isn't station housebroken.
Getaway "cur": dogs are difficult to follow—they don't have to be taught how to shake a tail.
Guard dogs: the function of safety shoes.
Mexican hairless: a canine Kojak.
Pest control officer: the cop who checks the premises for "bugs"—when the place really starts hopping, he "collars" the prime suspects to eliminate the need for flea-bargaining.
Polygraph: a device that won't let sleeping dogs (or anyone else) lie—subjects have to *sit* for the exam.
Silent alarm: a police-dog whistle (pitched *too high* for human hearing—and for 90 percent of American League batters.
Top dog: the one on customs inspection duty that rates the *highest* in sniffing out contraband.

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

CRIME DOSSIER

by OTTO PENZLER

NEITHER WIMSEY NOR WHIMSEY: I admit liking the fiction of Dorothy L. Sayers about as much as I enjoy reading H. C. Bailey and S. S. Van Dine, neither of whom ranks among my favorites. I also concede that the flaw is in me, not the literature, as too many people of intelligence and otherwise good taste find much to praise in them. For those whose predilections run in those directions, then, a word about two important books involving Miss Sayers.

The first arrives from an unexpected source: The Friends of the University of Toledo Libraries. *Wilkie Collins: A Biographical and Critical Survey* (limited to 1,000 numbered copies, $12.50) is an incomplete manuscript on which Miss Sayers worked, off and on, for nearly 30 years. Always wanting to get back to work on it and complete what would have been an enduring and vastly important tome, she was distracted from it again and again over the years, dying before it was anywhere near to being ready for publication. The massive editing job required to put the large fragment into a coherent unit was handled admirably by E. R. Gregory, who "rediscovered" the forgotten manuscript at the Humanities Research Center in Austin, Texas. Excellently illustrated with rare photographs and facsimiles, the paperbound volume has 120 pages and covers only the beginning of Collins' creative life, never reaching even the years of *The Woman in White* or *The Moonstone.* It's not nearly enough, but much better than nothing.

A book equally important in conception turns out to be a terrible disappointment. Although obviously a work of considerable scholarship, *An Annotated Guide to the Works of Dorothy L. Sayers* by Robert B. Harmon and Margaret A. Burger—no shortage of middle initials here — (Garland, 545 Madison Ave., New York, N.Y. 10022, $26) is a complicated book to use. Like all reference books, a bibliography must (a) contain complete and accurate information and (b) permit that informa-

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tion to be located with minimal difficulty. This book, so cheaply produced that it is not typeset but a reproduction of typewritten pages, contains some accurate information. Still, it is impossible to have much confidence in it. When, for example, cataloguing the first appearance of "The Man Who Knew How," the bibliographers write: "According to James Sandoe, [it] is included in one of these volumes." The reference is to *The Grand Magazine*, a reasonably popular magazine published in 77 volumes from 1905 to 1940. Not exactly precise, although they narrow the search a bit by adding, "it probably appeared before 1933." There is no chronological list of publications, nor even a basic chronological list of book publications. Even with the serendipitous plot synopses (solutions are not divulged), one deserves more for $26.

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BLOODY VISIONS

by CHRIS STEINBRUNNER

Mourners for the passing of the heyday of the adventure comic strip may now take heart: there are signs that these days may be returning. Stan Lee's brash young costumed crimefighter, *Spider-Man,* now web-swinging in countless newspapers, is surprisingly well written, sprightly and appealing. The novel new *Best Seller Showcase* illustrates top current suspense books in serial fashion, recently drawing from Robert Ludlum's *The Chancellor Manuscript,* in which a mystery author investigates the assassination of the director of a national security bureau. Ron Goulart, no stranger to *EQMM* pages, and author of the definitive history of the adventure comic during its golden age *(The Adventurous Decade),* has now created *Star Hawks,* which while though a science-fiction strip explores law and order 300 years in the future on another world. On a gigantic prison rehabilitation satellite nicknamed "Hoosegow," orbiting in another planetary system similar to our own, the police of the Interplan Law Service number androids, robots, and computers among their opponents, foil futuristic capers, solve "impossible" crimes unknown on earth. (The most endearing member of the Star Hawks swat team may well be "Sniffer," a robot dog.) Edgar nominee Goulart proves—as he does in most of his sf writing — that crime's rampant the worlds over.

The world's most famous newspaper-strip detective is coming to

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the screen again. Paramount will start filming *Dick Tracy* this summer. No cast has been set yet, but an overflowing gallery of creator Chester Gould's outrageous villains have been lined up for use: The Brow, Flattop, Mr. and Mrs. Prune, B. B. Eyes, Breathless Mahoney, the Mole, and Jerome Short, the midget gangster who makes his escapes on the back of a Great Dane. Aiding lantern-jawed Tracy will be old friends Gravel Gertie, B. O. Plenty, Junior, and Chief Patton. The live-action movie will be set in 1941 Chicago, and the producers have assured us that it will be played absolutely straight. Time will tell.

Meantime, the venerable old *Chicago Tribune* newspaper strip itself has taken on a new hand and a new life. In recent years, Tracy, once the most innovative and dynamic figure in crime-mystery comic art, had slipped into an unhappy decline. Now Max Collins, the young suspense-paperback author of the "Quarry" series character, has been hired to aid the aging Chester Gould in writing the plots (and he actually gets to co-sign his name next to Gould's on the dailies). Plain-clothesman Dick, in the business of fighting gangsters since 1931, in the past few years not quite so flamboyantly, is reactivating a flagging career — just when we need him most.

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INTERVIEW: JORGE LUIS BORGES

In each of the past several years, the world has assumed that the voting for the Nobel Prize in Literature would be close between Graham Greene, one of England's masters of crime and espionage fiction, and Jorge Luis Borges of Argentina, whose fantastic tales and fables create new universes of mystery. Each year, however, the Nobel selection committee has named writers virtually unknown outside their own countries. It is hoped that these grievous oversights will soon be corrected. Borges has twice appeared in *EQMM,* and "The Garden of Forking Paths," which was translated by Anthony Boucher for the issue of August 1948 was his first appearance in the United States.

EQMM: In your fable, "The Two Kings and the Two Labyrinths" [translated for the April 1962 issue of *EQMM* by Donald A. Yates], you wrote that: "Confusion and marvel are properly operations of God and not of man." Yet in many of your tales you create very complex, confusing and marvelous worlds, as you did in "The Garden of Forking Paths." How do you reconcile that with your theory?

BORGES: Did you find that story confusing?

EQMM: Yes.

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BORGES: So did I; it confused me.

EQMM: And you use the theme, or background, of complex, confusing labyrinths in many of your stories.

BORGES: Yes; I can't help myself. I apologize. When I wrote that story, I liked it. Now . . . I don't know. It's so confusing. It's too interwoven, too involved. I would rather write simple, straighforward stories, but when I do, my readers feel cheated.

EQMM: Your stories have become more simple in recent years. You seem to have changed your style in the past decade.

BORGES: Yes, and I think it all came about by rereading Kipling's *Plain Tales from the Hills.* I've been reading and rereading those stories all my life. But the last time I read them, I thought: "If only I could do something like this, write such an efficient story, some five or six pages, with no purple passages, that would be good."

EQMM: Many people who like mysteries don't know your stories; they don't know that you write stories in that genre.

BORGES: They think of me as highbrow, don't they?

EQMM: I think so.

BORGES: That is the worst thing that can happen to a writer. When they think you are an intellectual, it is difficult to find readers. People always suspect me. They think I am writing something secret. I am always suspected of writing layer upon layer of meaning.

EQMM: But that's true, isn't it?

BORGES: It is true of all writers.

(NOTE: This intervew will be concluded next month.)

THE JURY BOX

by JON L. BREEN

Over the long history of book reviewing, countless novels have been recommended to readers with some variation on the statement, "You can't put it down until you've finished it." But there is also a kind of book in the mystery field that you can't put down even after it's finished, the kind you want to reread on the spot to see just how well and how fairly the author has bamboozled you. It's that old Agatha Christie feeling, and detective-story purists will cherish any new novel that brings it on.

Such a novel was the 1976 chiller, *The Running of Beasts,* the first book-length collaboration of two writers already well known separately. In their second book together, they have done it again. **** Bill Pronzini and Barry N. Malzberg: *Acts of Mercy,* Putnam,

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$8.95. The story concerns the President of the United States, Nicholas Augustine, and opens in the White House. But instead of the large-canvas cataclysm of most political thrillers, it offers a closed-circuit whodunit with the Presidential menage as victims and suspects. If anything, the technical trickery is even more audacious and stunning than in the first P-and-M effort. Purely as a novel, *Acts of Mercy* is somewhat less successful, though, since the strength of the stunt somewhat weakens genuine character interest. Still, if separating reader from chair is the name of the game, this is an astonishing job.

*** C. Daly King: *The Curious Mr. Tarrant,* Dover, $3.50. Forty-two years after its first appearance in Britain, one of the rarest volumes in detective-story annals becomes available in its first American edition. King, a zestful, individual, somewhat uneven writer whose fascination with impossible crimes is reminiscent of Carr and Rawson, well deserves rediscovery. The stories are often more notable for their macabre elements than for the quality of Trevis Tarrant's ratiocination, but all are intriguing and gripping.

*** Bartholomew Gill: *McGarr and the Sienese Conspiracy,* Scribners, $7.95. Irish cop Peter McGarr's second recorded case takes him to Italy in his investigation of the bizarre murders of two former British Secret Service chiefs. Well written, colorful, and particularly strong on background.

*** Noah Webster: *A Pay-off in Switzerland,* Doubleday Crime Club, $6.95. Which car in the holiday safari across Europe is smuggling half a million pounds for Swiss "laundering"? Jonathan Gaunt joins the procession to find out in a sound travelogue mystery from the prolific Scot best known as Bill Knox.

*** Harry Carmichael: *False Evidence,* Dutton, $6.95. The best of the recent Quinn and Piper cases involves the disappearance of a passenger on an overnight ferry between Dublin and Liverpool. Carmichael is a traditionalist who always seems to have the ghost of Freeman Wills Crofts hovering over his novels.

*** Don Honig: *I Should Have Sold Petunias,* Jove/HBJ, $1.50. For a male writer, using a female point of view is always risky, but Honig makes his first-person heroine, the decently promiscuous unwitting mob girl Terry, a very real and involving character. The question remains, though: would a woman have told the story in just this way with just this vocabulary? My gothics consultant says no, but agrees that this is a funny, suspenseful, entertaining novel.

** Marvin Kaye: *The Laurel and Hardy Murders,* Dutton, $7.95. Hilary Quayle's latest case falls far short of her last one, the memorable *Bullets for Macbeth,* but it is worth reading for its look at the inner workings of an organization called the Sons of the Desert, with

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their ritual toasts to Mae Busch and Charley Hall and their comic by-laws. Fans of Babe and Stan will not be able to resist this novel, nor should they.

** James Stewart Thayer: *The Hess Cross,* Putnam, $8.95. Another World War II spy thriller, featuring Real People, this time Rudolf Hess and Enrico Fermi, whose face-to-face confrontation provides much of the book's interest. Despite half-digested research, old serial dialogue, and some seeming anachronisms, readers will keep going to the end to discover what's going on.

Among the reprints is Isaac Asimov's 1976 collection, *More Tales of the Black Widowers* (Fawcett-Crest, $1.50), 12 tales about a puzzle-loving dining club that needs no introduction to *EQMM* readers, who may, however, find that half the stories are new to them. Three appeared originally in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction,* and three more are original to this collection.

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AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	RETAIL PRICE	DISCOUNTED PRICE
Carmichael, Harry	FALSE EVIDENCE	Dutton	$6.95	$5.50
Gill, Bartholomew	MC GARR AND THE SIENESE CONSPIRACY	Scribner	7.95	6.35
Kaye, Marvin	THE LAUREL AND HARDY MURDERS	Dutton	7.95	6.35
Pronzini, Bill and Malzberg, Barry N.	ACTS OF MERCY	Putnam	8.95	6.95
Thayer, James Stewart	THE HESS CROSS	Putnam	8.95	6.95
Webster, Noah	A PAY-OFF IN SWITZERLAND	Doubleday Crime Club	6.95	5.50

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The two men had a job to do . . .

A COLD FOGGY DAY

by BILL PRONZINI

The two men stepped off the Boston-to-San Francisco plane at two o'clock on a cold foggy afternoon in February. The younger of the two by several years had sand-colored hair and a small birthmark on his right cheek; the older man had flat gray eyes and heavy black brows. Both wore topcoats and carried small overnight bags.

They walked through the terminal and down to one of the rent-al-car agencies on the lower level. The older man paid for the rental of a late-model sedan. When they stepped outside, the wind was blowing and the wall of fog eddied in gray waves across the airport complex. The younger man thrust his hands deep into the pockets of his topcoat as they crossed to the lot where the rental cars were kept. He could not remember when he had been quite so cold.

A boy in a white uniform brought their car around. The older man took the wheel. As he pulled the car out of the lot, the younger man said, "Turn the heater on, will you, Harry? I'm freezing in here."

Harry put on the heater. Warm air rushed against their feet, but it would be a long while before it was warm enough to suit the younger man. He sat blowing on his hands. "Is it always this cold out here?" he asked.

"It's not cold," Harry said.

"Well, I'm freezing."

"It's just the fog, Vince. You're not used to it."

"There's six inches of snow in Boston," Vince said. "Ice on the streets thick enough to skate on. But I'm damned if it's as cold as it is out here."

"You have to get used to it."

"I don't think I *could* get used to it," Vince said. "It cuts through you like a knife."

"The sun comes out around noon most days and burns off the

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fog," Harry said. "San Francisco has the mildest winters you've ever seen."

The younger man didn't say anything more. He didn't want to argue with Harry; this was Harry's home town. How could you argue with a man about his home town?

When they reached San Francisco, 20 minutes later, Harry drove a roundabout route to their hotel. It was an old but elegant place on Telegraph Hill, and the windows in their room had a panoramic view of the bay. Even with the fog, you could see the Golden Gate Bridge and the Bay Bridge and Alcatraz Island. Harry pointed out each of them.

But Vince was still cold and he said he wanted to take a hot shower. He stood under a steaming spray for ten minutes. When he came out again, Harry was still standing at the windows.

"Look at that view," Harry said. "Isn't that some view?"

"Sure," Vince agreed. "Some view."

"San Francisco is a beautiful city, Vince. It's the most beautiful city in the world."

"Then why did you ever leave it? Why did you come to Boston? You don't seem too happy there."

"Ambition," Harry said. "I had a chance to move up and I took it. But it's been a long time, Vince."

"You could always move back here."

"I'm going to do that," Harry said. "Now that I'm home again, I know I don't want to live anywhere else. I tell you, this is the most beautiful city anywhere on this earth."

Vince was silent. He wished Harry wouldn't keep talking about how beautiful San Francisco was. Vince liked Boston; it was his town just as San Francisco was Harry's. But Vince couldn't see talking about it all the time, the way Harry had ever since they'd left Boston this morning. Not that Vince would say anything about it. Harry had been around a long time and Vince was just a new man. He didn't know Harry that well—had only worked with him a few times; but everybody said you could learn a lot from him. And Vince wanted to learn.

That was not the only reason he wouldn't say anything about it. Vince knew why Harry was talking so much about San Francisco. It was to keep his mind off the job they had come here to do. Still, it probably wasn't doing him much good, or Vince any good either. The only way to take both their minds off the job was to get it done.

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"When are we going after him, Harry?" Vince said.

"Tonight."

"Why not now?"

"Because I say so. We'll wait until tonight."

"Listen, Harry—"

"We're doing this my way, remember?" Harry said. "That was the agreement. *My* way."

"All right," Vince said, but he was beginning to feel more and more nervous about this whole thing with Dominic DiLucci. He wished it was over and finished with and he was back in Boston with his wife. Away from Harry.

After a while Harry suggested they go out to Fisherman's Wharf and get something to eat. Vince wasn't hungry and he didn't want to go to Fisherman's Wharf; all he wanted to do was to get the job over and done with. But Harry insisted, so he gave in. It was better to humor Harry than to complicate things by arguing with him.

They took a cable car to Fisherman's Wharf and walked around there for a time, in the fog and the chill wind. Vince was almost numb by the time Harry picked out a restaurant, but Harry didn't seem to be affected by the weather at all. He didn't even have his topcoat buttoned.

Harry sat by the window in the restaurant, not eating much, looking out at the fishing boats moored in the Wharf basin. He had his face close to the glass, like a kid.

Vince watched him and thought: he's stalling. Well, Vince could understand that, but understanding it didn't make it any easier. He said finally, "Harry, it's after seven. There's no sense in putting it off any longer."

Harry sighed. "I guess you're right."

"Sure I am."

"All right," Harry said.

He wanted to take the cable car back to their hotel, but Vince said it was too cold riding on one of those things. So they caught a taxi, and then picked up their rental car. Vince turned on the heater himself this time, as high as it would go.

Once they had turned out of the hotel garage, Vince said, "Where is he, Harry? You can tell me that now."

"Down the coast. Outside Pacifica."

"How far is that?"

"About twenty miles."

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"Suppose he's not there?"

"He'll be there."

"I don't see how you can be so sure."

"He'll be there," Harry said.

"He could be in Mexico by now."

"He's not in Mexico," Harry said. "He's in a little cabin outside Pacifica."

Vince shrugged and decided not to press the point. This was Harry's show; he himself was along only as a back-up.

Harry drove them out to Golden Gate Park and through it and eventually onto the Coast Highway, identifying landmarks that were half hidden in fog. Vince didn't pay much attention; he was trying to forget his own nervousness by thinking about his wife back in Boston.

It took them almost an hour to get where they were going. Harry drove through Pacifica and beyond it several miles. Then he turned right, toward the ocean, onto a narrow dirt road that wound steadily upward through gnarled cypress and eucalyptus trees. That's what Harry said they were, anyway. There was fog here too, thick and gray and roiling. Vince could almost feel the coldness of it, as if it were seeping into the car through the vents.

They passed several cabins, most of them dark, a couple with warm yellow light showing at the windows. Harry turned onto another road, pitted and dark, and after a few hundred yards they rounded a bend. Vince could see another cabin then. It was small and dark, perched on the edge of a cliff that fell away to the ocean. But the water was hidden by the thick fog.

Harry parked the car near the front door of the cabin. He shut off the engine and the headlights.

Vince said, "I don't see any lights."

"That doesn't mean anything."

"It doesn't look like he's here."

"He'll be here."

Vince didn't say anything. He didn't see how Harry could know with that much certainty that Dominic DiLucci was going to be here. You just didn't know anybody that well.

They left the warmth of the car. The wind was sharp and stinging, blowing across the top of the bluff from the sea. Vince shivered.

Harry knocked on the cabin door and they stood waiting. And after a few moments the door opened and a thin man with

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haunted eyes looked out. He was dressed in rumpled slacks and a white shirt that was soiled around the collar. He hadn't shaved in several days.

The man stood looking at Harry and didn't seem surprised to see him. At length he said, "Hello, Harry."

"Hello, Dom," Harry said.

They continued to look at each other. Dominic DiLucci said, "Well, it's cold out there." His voice was calm, controlled, but empty, as if there was no emotion left inside him. "Why don't you come in?"

They entered the cabin. A fire glowed on a brick hearth against one wall. Dom switched on a small lamp in the front room, and Vince saw that the furniture there was old and overstuffed, a man's furniture. He stood apart from the other two men, thinking that Harry had been right all along and that it wouldn't be long before the job was finished. But for some reason that didn't make him feel any less nervous. Or any less cold.

Harry said, "You don't seem surprised to see me, Dom."

"Surprised?" Dom said. "No, I'm not surprised. Nothing can surprise me any more."

"It's been a long time. You haven't changed much."

"Haven't I?" Dom said, and smiled a cold humorless smile.

"No," Harry said. "You came here. I knew you would. You always came here when you were troubled, when you wanted to get away from something."

Dominic DiLucci was silent.

Harry said, "Why did you do it, Dom?"

"Why? Because of Trudy, that's why."

"I don't follow that. I thought she'd left you, run off with somebody from Los Angeles."

"She did. But I love her, Harry, and I wanted her back. I thought I could buy her back with the money. I thought if I got in touch with her and told her I had a hundred thousand dollars, she'd come back and we could go off to Brazil or someplace."

"But she didn't come back, did she?"

"No. She called me a fool and a loser on the phone and hung up on me. I didn't know what to do then. The money didn't mean much without Trudy; nothing means much without her. Maybe I wanted to be caught after that, maybe that's why I stayed around here. And maybe you figured that out about me along with everything else."

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"That's right," Harry said. "Trudy was right, too, you know. You *are* a fool and a loser, Dom."

"Is that all you have to say?"

"What do you want me to say?"

"Nothing, I guess. It's about what I expected from you. You have no feelings, Harry. There's nothing inside of you and there never was or will be."

Dom rubbed a hand across his face, and the hand was trembling. Harry just watched him. Vince watched him too, and he thought that Dominic DiLucci was about ready to crack; he was trying to bring it off as if he were in perfect control of himself, but he was ready to crack.

Vince said, "We'd better get going."

Dom glanced at him, the first time he had looked at him since they'd come inside. It didn't seem to matter to him who Vince was. "Yes," he said. "I suppose we'd better."

"Where's the money?" Harry asked him.

"In the bedroom. In a suitcase in the closet."

Vince went into the bedroom, found the suitcase, and looked inside. Then he closed it and came out into the front room again. Harry and Dom were no longer looking at each other.

They went outside and got into the rental car. Harry took the wheel again. Vince sat in the rear seat with Dominic DiLucci.

They drove back down to the Coast Highway and turned north toward San Francisco. They rode in silence. Vince was still cold, but he could feel perspiration under his arms. He glanced over at Dom beside him, sitting there with his hands trembling in his lap. From then on he kept his eyes on Harry.

When they came into San Francisco, Harry drove them up a winding avenue that led to the top of Twin Peaks. The fog had lifted somewhat, and from up there you could see the lights of the city strung out like misty beads along the bay.

As soon as the lights came into view Harry leaned forward, staring intently through the windshield. "Look at those lights," he said. "Magnificent. Isn't that the most magnificent sight you ever saw, Vince?"

And Vince understood then. All at once, in one stinging bite of perception, he understood the truth.

After Dominic DiLucci had stolen the $100,000 from the investment firm where he worked, Harry had told the San Francisco police that he didn't know where Dom could be. But then he

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had gone to the head of the big insurance company where he and Vince were both claims investigators—the same insurance company that handled the policy on Dom's investment firm—and had told the Chief that maybe he did have an idea where Dom was but hadn't said anything to the police because he wanted to come out here himself, wanted to bring Dom in himself. Dom wasn't dangerous, he said; there wouldn't be any trouble.

The Chief hadn't liked the idea much, but he wanted the $100,000 recovered. So he had paid Harry's way to San Francisco, and Vince's way with him as a back-up man. Both Vince and the Chief had figured they knew why Harry wanted to come himself. But they had been wrong. Dead-wrong.

Harry DiLucci was still staring out at the lights of San Francisco. And he was smiling.

What kind of man are you? Vince thought. What kind of man sits there with his own brother in the back seat, on the way to jail and ready to crack—his own brother—and looks out at the lights of a city and smiles?

Vince shivered. This time it had nothing to do with the cold.

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a *NEW* Hollywood story by

RON GOULART

Another brash and breezy tinsel-town tale as only Ron Goulart's advertising-agency account executive can tell one. This time you will meet Joe Tackery, "the best bloodbeast" in Hollywood's horror films, a man of many faces, and how he proved himself a master of disguise . . .

AND THE WINNER IS—

by RON GOULART

He shouldn't have confessed in front of all those people. But when he saw the man he'd murdered starting to come up on the stage to share the award, it unsettled him.

Everybody, since the awards banquet was televised live from Hollywood, knows what Oscar Kornfield did next. Some are even aware of what Joe Tackery was up to and what exactly his last words meant. Hardly anyone, though, knows about the trunkful of money.

I'm probably the only living person, besides perhaps Jana, who has the knowledge that there was $400,000 in cash involved in this business. As to where the trunk is now, I have no idea. Jana doesn't either, so far as I can determine without openly discussing it with her. Which I never will, since I don't want to get entangled any further. Let the money stay lost; there's very likely a curse on it anyway, a jinx.

Joe Tackery and I had lunch the day Kornfield fired him. We met at the Vegetarian Dragon, the health-food Chinese place in Westwood. A few of the tan and healthy-looking patrons gasped, a couple shrieked, even one of the usually unmovable waiters let out a frightened sigh when Joe came strolling in out of the smoggy yellow midday toward my booth.

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"See, and he claims I'm unbelievable," Tackery said as he dropped down opposite me. Lowering the dragon-shaped menu, I told him, "Coming to lunch in your makeup is—"

"Gauche, yeah, I know. Thing is, I didn't have time to remove it and still get over here on time. Because of the fist fight."

"You were in a fight? A real fight?"

"With Kornfield, after he fired me. Ha." When he laughed some of the scar tissue on his face cracked. Tackery poked at it, then toyed with his dangling left eyeball. "Should have seen what I did to him." He inspected his fingertip. "Huh, there's some *real* blood. I didn't think that turkey hit me hard enough to—"

"Why were you trading punches with the head of Magnum-Opus Productions? No, thanks."

Our waiter had brought a hot towel and a finger bowl for Tackery to use on his seemingly ruined face.

Tackery grinned up at him, flashing blackened fangs. "All make-believe. Illusion," he said and the waiter went away, leaving the scented towel behind. "You saw me in *Dr. Dementia*. Now, forgetting the story line, you have to admit I was convincing in that film."

"Best bloodbeast I've ever seen."

"Hell, even John Simon on *New York* called me completely disgusting and nauseating, and you know how few things he praises." He hit the table angrily with a bloody fist, causing the hand towel to give out a slippery, squishing sound. "I was even better in *Love Finds Dr. Dementia*. Right? I've been in *movies*. Ever since I had the title role in *Horrifying Slime* I've been considered one of the best horror men in this halfwitted town. Sure, doing my own makeup annoys certain people, but the hell with them. Didn't I almost get an Oscar for *Marylou's Demented Offspring*?"

"What's bothering Kornfield then?"

"He claims I'm no good, that my characterizations aren't believable. 'Wouldn't fool a cockeyed six-year-old,' is how he deftly phrased it. That, however is not the real reason. The real reason is, that toad is consumed by jealousy," explained Tackery. "See, I was supposed to, even though my halfwit agent didn't get it on paper yet, play a running character in this new *Ghost Doctor* TV series Kornfield's producing. Hell, I was doing them a favor to play television at all. By agreeing to be the accident-victim zombie I—"

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"Sounds like a difficult character to keep working into stories. Maybe that's why—"

"Naw, Kornfield gave me the ax because of Jana."

"Jana? I thought you were embroiled with a girl named Pam."

"Kim was her name and that's been over since she didn't come right back from the location shooting on *Rapist of the Range.*" Absently he started removing the warts and moles from his face. "Don't you know who Jana Dayside is?"

"Sure, my oldest boy has that poster of her hidden under his bed. We used her in a toothpaste commercial couple of years back. Before she hit with *Robots Three* on TV."

"She is, without doubt, the hottest property in Hollywood at the moment."

"You dating her?"

"I am, a real love match," he said, lowering his voice. "Trouble is, I strongly suspect Kornfield is, too."

"Kornfield just married the redhaired girl who used to be part of that rock group called Advanced Stages. Item was in the *National Intruder* only—"

"You've lived in this goofy town all your life and you never heard of a producer cheating on his wife?"

"Not so soon after the wedding. According to the *Intruder* he just gifted this redhead with a diamond-studded—"

"Oy, for a man who's slaved ten years in the advertising game, you have a very feeble idea of how the world works."

"Fifteen years actually," I corrected. "Be sixteen next—"

"It's me Jana *loves,* but I think Kornfield forces her to see him. After all, Magnum-Opus is producing *Robots Three.*"

"She ought to have enough clout now to be able to say no to Kornfield. The show's been Number One in the ratings for the last month." The waiter was hovering and I picked up my menu again. "We better order. The sweet-sour parsnips are—"

"See, I'm not absolutely certain she is going out with that lecherous grunion, but I *suspect* she is."

"Ask her."

"You don't simply *ask* the hottest property in town if she's two-timing you."

"Two-timing? There's a quaint old phrase—"

"My father used to say that, and when I get angry—"

"We have very nice kelp chow mein," offered our waiter cautiously, while trying not to look at Tackery.

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"Come back in a few minutes," he said.

"If you're sure Kornfield fired you for personal reasons you ought to have the Guild look—"

"Ha," laughed Tackery, causing one of his horrible eyebrows to fall off. "I don't need the guild to fix Kornfield's wagon. Once I determine what's what, I'll settle the whole thing myself."

The day after our lunch I had to fly to Florida unexpectedly to untangle some problems they were having with one of our shark-repellent commercials. While the repellent was repelling sharks, it attracted hordes of ugly little blue and orange fish who kept spoiling most of our expensive underwater footage. Since I was head account man, the client expected me to come up with some way of shooing all the ugly little fish away. The first thing I worked out, with the help of a very high-priced marine biologist, got rid of the ugly fish but dyed our actor a pale lavender. What with one thing and another, including a mild case of sunstroke, I was three weeks in Florida.

By the time I returned to Los Angeles, Joe Tackery was already at work on his plan to undermine Kornfield while finding out what the producer and Jana Dayside were up to. He took to hanging around the Magnum-Opus studios out in Burbank and around Kornfield's Beverly Hills home wearing various disguises. Once he got himself up as the mutilated vampire he'd played in *Stultified.* Excessive in my opinion, but it seemed to fool Kornfield. Tackery was able to trail him all across Southern California without the producer's being aware of it.

The third day of his vigil Tackery followed Kornfield directly to Jana Dayside's new peach-colored mansion in Bel Air, thus confirming his worst fears. After that he determined to get something on his rival, something damaging enough to put him out of competition.

When he outlined all this to me over lunch at the Frozen Goatherd, that yogurt-on-a-stick place in Santa Monica, I told him it would be much simpler to abandon Jana than to trail Kornfield hither and yon.

"You forget," Tackery said, himself this particular afternoon except for a false mustache, "that Kornfield fired me off the *Ghost Doctor* show. He says I'm not good at makeup and disguise, but what I'm doing proves otherwise. You also forget he's been squiring my lady around town in a most sneaky way."

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"With her compliance."

"Who would willingly date a toad like him? She's obviously being coerced. She's a very sensitive, introspective girl and a heavy like—"

"On *Robots Three* I saw her lift up a full garbage truck and heave it through—"

"Trick stuff, as you well know," he said, scowling. "I'm most certainly going to revenge myself on Kornfield. I'm pretty sure, by the way, he's trying to get me blacklisted with some of the other producers in town. He won't get away with that either."

Right at this point in time I left for the Nyanya Film Festival, where one of our dandruff-fighter commercials was up for a Special Award. Unfortunately the Nyanya rebels picked the week of the festival to stage a terror raid on the capital. Along with nearly 200 other invited guests, I was held hostage in the Royal Palace of Cinema for four and a half days. We had to get along on what food there was in the lobby, mostly popcorn and chocolate-covered raisins.

The diet and the constant threats of violence from our surly captors made my stay in Nyanya less than pleasant. Possibly you didn't see anything about the incident in the papers or on the news—Nyanya doesn't seem able to get much publicity in the outside world. Which is one of the things the rebels were grousing about.

Recuperating from the trip consumed another two weeks, so I wasn't back in the agency until the tail end of summer. My lovely secretary informed me that several strange people had been dropping in asking after me—a one-legged sailor, a very ill-looking Balkan count, a man who appeared to have suffered a severe accident, and a shaggy fellow in a bloodstained overcoat.

"Joe Tackery," I decided.

My secretary screamed just then, gesturing at the opening elevator.

A sinister-looking Oriental was shuffling into the reception area on my floor. "Do you have a moment, most celestial sir?"

"Come on into my office, Joe."

"Shall I alert the authorities?" whispered my secretary.

"Only an actor," I assured her.

"I'm still not used to this town, it's not at all like East Moline."

"Ha, ha!" remarked Tackery when we were closed in my large

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sunbright office.

"Is that a cackle of triumph?"

"First, how are you feeling?"

"Not bad, I seem to have—"

"Good, good." He hunkered down in the chair most of the clients prefer. "Let me fill you in on what I've unearthed."

"Don't get yellow all over the chair."

"This is smear-proof Oriental makeup," Tackery said. "I have them now, have them by the proverbial short hairs."

"Who?"

"Kornfield and that little twit of a business partner of his, Tuck Bensen."

"Bensen's about your size. He's not exactly little or—"

"Spiritually he's a shrimp, morally he's a midget. That offensive little—"

"How'd Bensen get into this? Is he going around with Jana too?"

"No, she isn't *that* goofy." He hunched lower in the chair, rubbing his gnarled taloned hands together. "I've got them on Murder One."

I blinked, dropping the soy margarine carton I'd been toying with. "Murder?"

He nodded. "Ever hear of a guy known as Mojave McWilliams?"

"Old coot who lives out in the desert, old-time prospector? Struck it rich years ago and built himself some kind of castle out there. Rumored to be fantastically wealthy."

"The rumors are true," he said. "Old Mojave had a steamer trunk chockful of cash money. $400,000 worth to be exact." From out of his robe sleeve he produced a fat wad of bills. "Money like this."

"You mean you stole the old man's life savings?"

"Life savings? Mojave was much more than a prospector—he made his dough in sundry shady enterprises. Besides which, I didn't swipe the loot. Kornfield and Bensen did."

"Then how come you—"

"They don't as yet know I have the trunk or where I hid it." He leaned back and laughed, first as himself and then as the sinister Oriental. "There's an old folksong that advises you to put your money down in your shoe before coming into a town like this, otherwise they're going to take it away from you. Mojave thought he had his cash safely stashed, but he was wrong."

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"I don't quite under—"

"Let me explain."

What had been happening was this. After Tackery, in his varied disguises, had been trailing Kornfield for a few weeks he discovered the producer was making several trips out to the desert. Accompanied usually by his partner, Tuck Bensen, he visited the mammoth adobe fortress Mojave McWilliams had erected for himself when he retired from his sundry shady enterprises. McWilliams, who shunned people, had one weakness. Well, more than one actually, but one which Kornfield and Bensen could exploit. He was vain. When they approached him with the notion of Magnum-Opus doing an hour television documentary on his colorful life, the old desert rat admitted them into his fortress and invited them to return whenever they wished.

What Kornfield and his partner were really after was the trunkful of money the old man was rumored to have hidden on the premises. Despite their apparent success and frequent mentions in such publications as the *National Intruder,* both Oscar Kornfield and Tuck Bensen were on the edge of bankruptcy. Kornfield's cash had flowed out to his earlier wives—there'd been six prior to the redhaired girl from Advanced Stages. Bensen's money had been lost at two places, Las Vegas and the track. $400,000 would be a big help.

So they went after Mojave. One night, long after he'd come to trust them completely, Bensen suddenly jabbed him in the arm with a hypodermic. This knocked the old prospector out, and a different shot caused him to speak the absolute truth. Unfortunately, right after McWilliams told them where the trunk was hidden, he died. Giving unexpected injections to old men sometimes has that effect.

Tackery witnessed all this from a ledge outside the castle living room. Besides being expert at makeup, he was a pretty fair stuntman. He managed to watch as Kornfield and Bensen hid Mojave's body in the cellar room where the trunk had been hidden. Since Mojave was a recluse they didn't expect anyone to find him for a long while. He had no servants, and kept a year's supply of simple foods on hand.

The producer and his partner, with Tackery discreetly following, next drove to a piece of land that Kornfield still owned in one of the undeveloped stretches of canyon beyond Los Angeles. Working all night the two men buried the trunkful of money, intending

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to let it sit a week or two before making use of it. By that time they'd know if they'd got away clear.

Tackery waited until they drove off, then dug up the loot. After helping himself to enough cash to finance his campaign for a month or more, he took the trunk and hid it at a new and different location.

"Doesn't that make you an accessory to the murder?" I asked when he'd finished the account.

"No, it makes me a light-hearted Robin Hood."

"You witnessed a murder. It's your duty to—"

"Yeah, eventually I'll blow the whistle on the two of them," Tackery promised, grinning inscrutably. "Right now, however, I am going to have some fun."

"Fun?"

"Did you know Kornfield has taken to carrying a gun?"

"No, it wasn't in the *Intruder*."

"While little Bensen is consulting Madame Olga down in Manhattan Beach to get some tips on life on the other side of the veil." Tackery was bouncing in the chair, hugging himself, trying to control his amusement and elation.

"You've been making up like Mojave McWilliams," I accused. "Yes, that must be it. You've been getting yourself up like that old prospector and haunting Kornfield and Bensen."

"Merely giving them little flashes," he said. "You know, at a premiere I'll be at the edge of the crowd where they can only catch a glimpse. Or I might stroll across one of their lawns during a cocktail party. A cinchy impersonation—all you need is lots of whiskers."

"Listen, you're going to—"

"Wait now. I couldn't possibly fool them. Right? Because Kornfield is on record as saying how bad I am at makeup and character work. I'm no good, so I couldn't make anyone believe I was Mojave."

I wasn't happy about all he'd told me. I felt, somehow, as though I were also an accomplice. "How does what you're doing help you with Jana Dayside?"

"Once I've toppled Kornfield, turned him into a quivering wreck, he'll leave her alone. Since I started this game I haven't had much time for her, but that'll soon change."

"If he and Bensen go under, that could ruin Magnum-Opus and probably spell the end of *Robots Three*."

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"Naw, they can be replaced. Anyway, M-O is secretly owned by a syndicate of Arabs. They aren't about to let a hot show like Jana's fold."

"Seems to me there are moral issues involved—"

"Come on, don't start laying that kind of talk on me. I confide in you because I know you're above morality."

"Even so—"

"Even so, you get ready to see that toad Kornfield go right down the chute."

Maybe, since I'd made the mistake of mentioning moral issues, Tackery began to feel differently about confiding in me. I know I saw him much less from then on, though it may only be because I got heavily involved in refilming six of our dog-food commercials. The client didn't feel the original canines were lively enough. While attempting to reshoot with livelier dogs I was attacked by one of the German shepherds, and a St. Bernard tried to eat part of one of the cameras. It was a hectic period, causing me to forget about Joe Tackery and his situation.

As it turned out, that meeting in my office, when he was in his Oriental getup, was to be my last encounter with him. I saw him once more, as millions of others all across America did, on the Lulu Awards Show. Except, I guess, most of those who saw him didn't realize it was Joe Tackery. They thought they were seeing Tuck Bensen.

None of what follows I am absolutely certain of. Some of it I didn't even find out about until weeks after the telecast. This is, however, what I believe must have happened. Tackery continued to follow Kornfield, now and then giving him a glimpse of himself as Mojave McWilliams. Kornfield grew increasingly nervous and finally drove out to the desert. A hot wind was roaring on the night he let himself into the fortress. He ventured into the cellar and found the body of the dead prospector exactly where they'd left it. Tackery couldn't quite see the producer's expression from his vantage point, flat out on the stones of the courtyard, yet he sensed it must be an exquisite one. Here was Mojave dead, so who had he been seeing? Was it a ghost? Or was he crazy?

The next thing the worried producer did was hurry to the spot where he and Bensen had buried the loot. This time, hidden behind scruffy brush and thin trees, Tackery did see Kornfield's face. It was indeed an exquisite expression which touched the

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producer's features when he discovered the trunkful of money was gone.

Kornfield went to the home of his partner. Tuck Bensen denied moving the money, which was perfectly true. Kornfield didn't believe him. They quarreled and Kornfield strangled the smaller man to death. He was unhappy on realizing what he'd done. Now, so far as he knew, he'd never find the $400,000. His only piece of good luck was that, since Bensen was in such terrible financial shape, there were no servants in his big Moorish home. Kornfield searched it thoroughly, twice, and found not a trace of the missing money.

Lugging the body of his defunct partner to his car, Kornfield returned to his empty lot and deposited him in the hole where the trunk once had been. He covered him with earth and announced, on returning to Magnum-Opus the next morning, that his partner was off on a well-deserved vacation in South America. This way he'd have a few days to figure out his next move.

Kornfield still hadn't worked out much in the way of a plan by the night of the Lulu Awards banquet for the best television shows of the year. He and Bensen were up for a golden statuette as co-producers in the Best Detective Series category. Accompanied by his newest wife and attired in a sky-blue dinner jacket which concealed the revolver he always carried now, Kornfield attended. If you noticed him at his table you wouldn't have realized he was nervous or distraught. He was smiling, gracious, attentive to his guests.

The Award ceremonies ran smoothly, except when they were giving out the Best Animal Actor award. During that the German shepherd candidate chased the presenter, that platinum-blond guy who's in *City Morgue,* around the dais while nipping at his tux. It was the same nasty dog who'd tried to destroy me when we refilmed our dog-food spots. I was pleased to see, watching at home over TV, that the dog could be mean with other people. The client hinted there was something about me which had agitated a usually amiable animal.

Jana Dayside was the one who was to present the Lulu for Best Detective series and she looked completely stunning.

"Stunning," I said.

"Obvious," said my wife.

Jana read the nominees in that husky voice of hers, tossed her abundant blonde hair and very sensually opened the envelope.

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"And the winner is—*City Morgue*, Magnum-Opus Productions," she read. "Mr. Oscar Kornfield will accept."

In a very stately, for him, manner Kornfield made his way up to the dais. Jana gave him a quick hug before handing over the Lulu.

Kornfield leaned into the arc of microphones. "I'm very pleased, as well as honored, to accept this award," he began. "Obviously this honor wouldn't have been possible without the help and support of a great many people. Chief among them is my devoted partner, Tuck Bensen, who unfortunately can't be here since he's enjoying a much-deserved vacati—"

"But I'm not on vacation, Oscar."

What Kornfield saw was his dead partner, miraculously alive again, moving toward him into the limelight. "You can't be here!" Kornfield shouted. "I killed and buried you." With an angry grunt he yanked out the pistol from his shoulder holster. "And I'll do it again!"

He fired four shots into Joe Tackery's chest.

Before Tackery died he managed to say something. It was picked up by the microphones. "I told you I was good," he said.

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

THE MARKSMA'AM

by JOHN LARGE

She lived in a tumbledown shanty
When lawmen and order were scanty,
  But with stiff upper lip
  She fired from the hip
And nicknamed herself Vigil Aunty.

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a *NEW* crime-detective story by

PATRICIA McGERR

Frank Crawford was as careful and cautious as if his life depended on it. And a life did depend on his plan—a life he must eliminate to be free . . . What a pleasure to have Patricia McGerr back home!

IN THE CLEAR

by *PATRICIA McGERR*

Frank Crawford was a careful man. Before taking any important action he figured the odds, balanced the gains against the costs, and made detailed plans. Although a moderate gambler, he did not bet more than he could afford to lose, seldom backed a longshot, and never drew to an inside straight. When his marriage at last became intolerable, he studied his alternatives with the same cautious deliberation that he gave a sales campaign for his appliance company.

After nearly 20 years of marriage the only feeling he had for Doris was a kind of mild contempt. The pleasing plumpness of girlhood had become middle-aged obesity. They had few common interests and her striving for intellectual improvement made her, in his eyes, an even greater bore. But she was an adequate housekeeper and put good meals on the table whenever he chose to come home to eat them.

For other satisfactions he looked elsewhere and had a long-standing arrangement with the manicurist in a shop near his office. Inge, though attractive and compliant, was not irreplaceable and he had no wish to make their relationship legal. Doris, on her side, was willing to ignore his infidelity as long as it did not disturb her comfortable existence. Thus there evolved a pattern that made it convenient for them to stay together while leading mainly separate lives. Neither had any reason to seek a

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change until Julie Casement came to work for the agency that handled Frank's advertising.

Julie was small and slim with shaggily clipped black hair and large trusting brown eyes. Frank took her to dinner and when the evening ended he tried to analyze his odd sense of exaltation. The feelings she stirred in him were different from any he had ever known. Desire was softened by tenderness. He wanted to protect her from all the hurts of the world, even from himself. I'm in love, he decided with astonishment, in love for the first time in my life.

But she turned down his next invitation after one of her co-workers told her he was married. The regret in her tone encouraged him to argue, but it was no use.

"I suppose I sound dreadfully old-fashioned," she admitted, "but it's the way I was raised. I can't go out with you again."

"You must know there's more between us than a casual encounter," Frank persisted. "I care for you, Julie. Last night I thought you felt the same way."

"I do. But there's no point in talking about it. Please don't make it any more painful for me."

"I never want to cause you pain."

"Then say goodbye now. That's all there is to say."

He heard the click of her phone and put his own down more slowly. She was so dear, so good, so defenseless. She needed him to look after her. That evening at dinner he raised for the first time the question of divorce.

"You got some girl in trouble?" Doris asked harshly.

"Of course not."

"Then why the sudden rush to break up our marriage?"

"It's not sudden. Our marriage has been unsatisfactory for many years."

"You may not be satisfied," she countered, "but I am. I don't intend to change my whole way of life just because some bit of fluff has caught your eye."

Leaving the table, he drove across town to Inge's apartment. Responding curtly to her greeting, he strode to the kitchen and poured a generous measure of Scotch.

"What's bugging you?" she asked. "Your old lady giving you a hard time?"

"What's that to you?"

"My, we are in a foul mood. If you don't want to talk to me, why did you come?"

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In answer he pulled her toward him and pressed his mouth on hers with a roughness that made her wince. Later, when he left her, his tension was somewhat eased but his spirits were still low. I've got two women, he thought morosely. Two bad bargains. Doris, fat and silly. Inge, hard and greedy. Then there's Julie. Gentle and sweet and unattainable.

Lying awake, he thought about divorce. Doris' opposition might wilt under pressure, but the price would be prohibitive. Living in a community property state, she'd take half of his savings, plus high alimony. He wanted Julie to have a life of luxury, not to scrimp on Doris' leavings. Nor should he make Julie, with her high standards, the cause of a messy divorce. But if Doris should die . . .

In the dark he let his mind play with the picture of himself as widower. Lonely, bereft, turning to Julie for comfort. Ah, yes, that would bring her to him. If only Doris were dead!

It was a concept to which his mind returned again and again in the days that followed. He began to look at his wife with eyes that saw her not as a woman but as a victim. His fantasies showed him a variety of methods—knife and gun, rope and poison. But he knew that when a woman is murdered, her husband is the Number One suspect. And if the investigation shows that the marriage was unhappy and the man had a younger mistress, the police will look no further. Yet if he ruled out both divorce and death, what was left? A long arid stretch of life without Julie.

What he needed was an undetectable poison or a weight that would drop on her head when he was far away. But those were, he knew, impossible dreams. If he killed Doris, he'd go to prison. If he divorced her, he'd be impoverished. He was in a trap with no exit. As a realist, he was learning to live with that fact until one afternoon he saw Julie. She was walking beside a well-dressed young man, her faced raised to look up at him, absorbed in their conversation. The sight of her with someone else, the thought that he might lose her, was like a stab of physical pain. That was when he thought of Gregor.

Gregor operated a newsstand on a downtown street corner. In addition to papers and magazines, he sold candy, gum, cigarettes, and postcards. He also took bets on numbers and on a variety of sporting events. Through him, according to rumor, one could obtain loans at usurious interest. It was assumed, though no one

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said it out loud, that he had underworld connections.

Frank waited until evening, after the brisk rush-hour business, then approached to put $20 on a favorite in the next day's races. The transaction completed, he said with careful casualness, "By the way, a friend of mine has a problem. There's a guy who's—well, in his way, if you know what I mean. You know anybody who might—uh—have him taken care of?"

"Maybe." Without changing expression, Gregor scribbled numbers on a scrap of paper and handed it to Frank. "Ask for Dr. Brill."

"Doctor?"

"If he's looking for a permanent cure."

"Can you tell me what the—uh—doctor charges?"

"Two grand for a routine job with no complications."

"How does—"

"Look, you got the number. Tear it up, give it to your friend, do what you want. But don't tell me any more, don't ask me. You walk away and I forget we ever had this talk. Okay?"

"Right, Gregor."

He was trembling when he left him, the hand that held the phone number thrust deep in his pocket. I can't do it, he told himself. To put out a—what's the word?—a contract on Doris. To hire someone to kill her. It's a crazy notion. But he memorized the number before he burned the paper and he knew, deep within himself, that some day he'd make the call.

For the rest of the week he thought of little else. He must not be rash or hasty. Before he took an irrevocable action, he must study all the angles, make careful preparations. First, there was the money. If Doris died violently, recent large cash withdrawals from his account would be a signal to investigators. Instead he began to squirrel small sums away in a metal box locked in the bottom drawer of his desk. A run of winning hands at his regular Friday-night poker session brought in over $300 which went into the box intact on Monday morning.

While the fund grew he also gave thought to eliminating, or at least obscuring, his motive. On Doris' birthday he invited another couple to dine with them at the city's best hotel. There he presented her with an expensive amber necklace and was, through the evening, ostentatiously kind and attentive.

"What are you up to?" she asked suspiciously when they were alone. "Buttering me up for something, I can see that."

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"We're stuck with each other, old girl," he said with false jollity. "Why not make the best of it? It wasn't bad in the beginning, you know. If we both try a little, maybe we can get back to that."

"I guess it won't hurt to try," she conceded.

As his next move he brought home a packet of travel brochures with the suggestion that they celebrate their wedding anniversary on a Mediterranean cruise. He could count on her to display the folders to her bridge and luncheon partners who would become, if needed, witnesses to his concern for his wife's happiness. If needed. That remained the operative phrase. Several times he came close to calling the number given him by Gregor. Each time he drew back.

What finally decided him was a story in the Monday morning paper linking a series of robberies that had taken place throughout the city and its suburbs during the past few months. The method of operation was, according to police, similar enough to point to a single perpetrator, nicknamed the Bike Bandit because a motorcycle had, in several instances, been heard or seen near the scene of the crime. Seven residents had returned from an evening out to find their homes stripped of money, jewelry, and other small valuable objects. An eighth, surprising the thief in the act, had been struck with a heavy candlestick and left unconscious. She was recovering in a local hospital.

Frank, reading the story a second time, knew that if he was ever going to act, it had to be now. He left his office shortly before noon to make the call from an outdoor booth in an isolated area. When a voice said, "Answering Service," he asked for Dr. Brill.

"Leave your name and number and the doctor will call back."

"This is Mr. Smith," Frank said, and read off the number from the dial. He had about a ten-minute wait.

"Dr. Brill here." The new voice was clear and authoritative. "To whom am I speaking?"

"Mr. Smith. Gregor said you can help me with a—a permanent cure."

"You know the terms?"

"He told me two thousand."

"Right, if it's a standard operation."

"I thought it might be made to look like the Bike Bandit."

"That can be arranged. What's the patient's name and address?"

"Mrs. Frank Crawford, 4100 Rinegold Road."

"Have you set a date?"

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"She'll attend a lecture from eight to nine thirty on Friday evening and get home about ten. If someone can be waiting in the house—"

"We'll handle the details. What about the husband? Will he be with her?"

"No, he has other plans for the evening."

"I assume you have the money ready."

"Yes."

"Then follow these instructions. Put the two grand in a plain brown envelope and leave it in locker number twenty-three at the airport before five p.m. on Wednesday. Got that?"

"Yes. Locker twenty-three on Wednesday. What about the key?"

"We don't need it. Just be sure the case is there on time."

"If you get full payment in advance, how do I know you'll carry out your end of the bargain?"

"How do you know a mechanic puts the parts he charges for in your car? You have to trust us, Mr. Smith. If you don't—well, it's your decision. If the money's in the box on Wednesday, the operation will take place Friday night. If not, the deal is off. No hard feelings either way."

Dr. Brill broke the connection but it was almost a minute before Frank hung up and walked out of the booth. I've done it, he thought. I've hired a killer. His mind veered away from the picture of Doris' dead body. He couldn't go through with it. He wasn't a murderer. He'd take the money from his desk, deposit it in the bank, and that would be the end of it. It would be as if the phone call had never been made.

But on Wednesday, Julie brought over an ad layout for his approval, and seeing her rekindled his desire. As soon as she left he sealed the money in an envelope and drove to the airport. On the way back he dropped the locker key into a roadside trashcan. His decision was irreversible.

On Thursday he stopped at the travel agency to make reservations on the cruise ship Doris had chosen. She was almost childishly pleased when he told her about it that evening. Everything was done. In one more day he'd be free. Then, on Friday morning, there was an unexpected snag. The man at whose house that night's poker session was scheduled came down with flu. Another player phoned to say the game was canceled.

"Oh, no!" Frank exclaimed. "We can't call it off now. We'll get a substitute."

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"The problem is a place to play. Can you take us in?"

"No, that's not possible. How about Jim?"

"He's having his place painted. What's so bad about missing one week's game? You feeling lucky?"

"No, I just—" He paused, his mind working quickly. He'd overreacted. Mustn't leave the impression that the cancellation was important. "The thing is, my wife's going to an art lecture and if I tell her there's no game, she'll try to drag me along."

"I see your problem, pal." The other man chuckled. "My advice is, don't tell her. See you next week."

Frank sat looking at the silent phone. Damn. Damn. Damn! It was too perfect. I should have known something would go wrong. What do I do now? Call off the operation or postpone it? But the groundwork is all laid. It may be weeks before Doris and I have separate engagements for the same evening. And I'm sure Brill doesn't give refunds.

All right, calm down, think it through. All you've lost is an alibi. You've the rest of the day to set up another. Yet each idea was quickly discarded. Whatever he did must look natural. Any uncharacteristic activity would seem just what it was, an attempt to establish an alibi. He wasn't a moviegoer. He didn't bowl or shoot pool. He met his friends and customers for lunch not dinner. There was no one with whom he could, without strangeness, arrange to spend the evening. Except Inge.

His lips twisted wryly at the thought. She'd be a natural enough companion. And useless as an alibi. Who would believe a man's mistress if she said he was with her at the time his wife was murdered? And yet—He held onto her name a little longer. To call Inge when his poker game fell through was completely in character. If he took her to a public place and made sure they were visible and identifiable during the crucial time period, he'd be home free. With a lifting of spirits he reached for the phone.

Having made the date, he began to see ways it might serve as more than a simple alibi. Tonight he'd end the relationship, tell her he didn't intend to call her again. Then he could start fresh with Julie, with no old entanglements, no loose ends. More important, it would be one more piece in the mosaic he was building of an improved marriage.

Through the day he pondered his plans until every detail was perfect. He even rehearsed in the washroom the expression of stunned bereavement he would show the police. By the time he

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left his office he had begun to believe that the game cancellation was, in fact, a stroke of good luck.

He timed his arrival home for a few minutes before the friend with whom Doris was attending the lecture came by to pick her up. He walked with her to the car and helped her in.

"Have a good time," he told them both, "and soak up lots of culture. It will stand us in good stead in those foreign galleries. Did Doris tell you we're planning a cruise?"

"Yes, it sounds wonderful."

"See you later, hon." He patted her hand before closing the door, then watched with satisfaction as the car drove off. A touching farewell for Sue Farrell to describe when the police questioned her.

A short time later he was on his way to Inge's. Parking in an alley, he locked the car doors but left the lights on. Inge lived on the ground floor of an old remodeled house and he was about to knock on her kitchen door when he realized that if she noticed the car headlights on, he'd have to turn them off. Shaken a little by the near error, he walked around to the front.

Over drinks he told her that he'd reserved a table at a restaurant two blocks away.

"That Spanish place?" she protested. "I want to go some place fancy. You trying to cut expenses?"

"Somebody told me the guitarist is good. I'd like to hear him."

"Yeah? I didn't put on my Sunday best to eat rice and beans at a neighborhood joint."

"It's not that cheap." He cut short the argument. "Anyway, the reservation's made and I'm hungry. If you don't want to go—"

"Oh, all right." Sullenly she gave in. "Some great evening this is going to be."

Inge's shoes were not made for walking and her temper was not improved by Frank's insistence that the restaurant was too close to take his car. Her bad humor too, Frank congratulated himself, is in my favor. When the waiter tells the police we quarreled all through dinner, it will shore up my story of our split. He made no effort to be conciliatory but let her ramble on with her complaints. When the waiter put platters of paella in front of them he said loudly and harshly, "Shut up and eat. I'm sick of your bellyaching."

It was a silent meal. Inge sulked and Frank, secretly rejoicing, maintained an expression of grim displeasure. A mediocre

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flamenco dancer opened the 9:30 floor show. The guitarist wasn't much better, but Frank applauded with enthusiasm and sent the waiter to request "Adios, muchachas." The guitarist came to their table to lean soulfully over Inge as he sang. Frank thanked him with a five-dollar bill.

"What was that all about?" Inge challenged. "After being so mean all evening, do you think you can get round me with sentimental music?"

"No," he answered. "It's my way of saying goodbye. I won't be seeing you again." He signaled for the check.

"You what?" Smoldering resentment burst into flame. "You think you can brush me off like—like a squeezed lemon? You listen to me, Frank Crawford—"

"There's no need to shout."

"Oh, yes, there is." As expected, her voice rose higher. "You think you can pick me up and throw me away whenever you feel like it. Just let me tell you—"

"Hush, everybody's looking at us." He produced a credit card. The waiter took it and went away.

"I've got feelings too, you know." She pushed away the table and stood up. They were a center of attention for all the nearby diners.

"What do you want?" he asked with deliberate insult. "Severance pay?"

"You'll find out what I want," she said wildly. "You can't treat me like dirt and get away with it."

He signed the check, accepted his card and receipt, and stood. A glance at his watch showed it was 10:10. Right on schedule.

"Come on, let's get out of here." He took her arm. She jerked away and half ran to the door. Passing the matire d' he mumbled in half apology, "The lady's a little upset."

Following her to the street, he let her stay a few paces ahead of him until she reached her apartment. She darted inside and slammed the door. And that suited him just fine. Inge's part in the program was finished and she had, unwittingly, played it superbly.

He returned to the alley. His car was dark, the headlights no longer burning. He got behind the wheel, turned the key in the ignition, but the engine did not respond. As planned, the battery was dead. He walked through the alley to the next block where there was an all-night drugstore.

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"Car trouble," he told the man on duty as he headed for the phone booth at the back.

"You'll have a hard time getting someone to fix it this time of night."

"I'm not going to try. It can stay where it is until morning. I just want to use your phone to call a cab."

In the booth he could not resist dialing his own number. It should be all over by now. He listened, hardly breathing, as the phone began to ring in his house. He counted up to ten. There was no answer. Satisfied, he called the cab company and gave the address of the drugstore. When he stepped out of the booth he was surprised to discover that he was drenched in perspiration. He mopped his face with his handkerchief as he moved to the counter and ordered coffee. When it came his hand was shaking so that half of it slopped over the counter as he tried to raise the cup to his lips.

The cab arrived quickly. Riding home he responded in monosyllables to the driver, discouraging conversation. He had to get his nerves under control, examine the plan for any last-minute flaws. He had left the restaurant at 10:15, entered the drugstore at 10:30. Even with wings he could not have got across town and back in that period.

The house, when the cab pulled up, was dark. The meter registered $2.45. Frank affected embarrassment.

"I'm afraid the smallest I have is a fifty," he said. "Can you change it?"

"You kidding, buddy? I don't carry that kind of cash on late night calls. Why didn't you break it in the drugstore?"

"I just wasn't thinking. If you'll come to the house with me, I'll get it from my wife."

"Okay, if that's how it's got to be." Grumbling, he accompanied Frank up the sidewalk. "Looks like your old lady's in bed. She won't like being routed out to pay your fare."

"She'll understand."

"Lucky you. Mine'd raise hell."

The driver waited on the porch while Frank unlocked the door and went inside. He took a quick breath, bracing himself, then flipped the switch that lighted the living room. Doris lay in the middle of the rug, arms outflung, eyes staring, mouth twisted in a grimace. Although the sight was expected, his sense of shock was genuine.

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"My God! Doris—oh no!" He turned back to the cabman. "Something terrible has happened."

"What's going on, buddy?" The other man followed him in. "Oh, hey! Look at that! Is she dead?"

"I don't know." He dropped to his knees beside her, took her hand. It was cold, lifeless. "Call a doctor. Tell him to hurry."

"What you want is the police."

"Yes, I—you're right. Will you call them? The phone's in the hall."

"Sure thing." He went out.

Frank moved away from the body to a chair at the far end of the room and listened to the driver tell someone, "A lady's been killed." That's no lady, his mind appended with sick humor, that's my wife. All I have to do now is act dazed, broken, and tell the truth about how I spent the evening. When the driver came back he was slumped in the chair, his face buried in his hands.

"They'll be right over," the cabman reported. "He said for me to stay here and nobody should touch anything."

"Yes, fine. Thank you."

"Sorry about your wife, mister." He offered awkward sympathy. "Must be the guy they call the Bike Bandit. If the cops worked as hard chasing crooks as they do handing out tickets, he'd been in jail weeks ago."

His words rolled on but Frank stopped listening. He kept his face covered, his eyes closed, and his thoughts turned inward. At last the doorbell rang, the cabman went to answer it, and the room was suddenly full of men. One of them squatted beside the body. Another crossed the room to Frank who rose to meet him.

"Lieutenant Hamill, Homicide," he identified himself. "This your house?"

"Yes, I—I'm Frank Crawford. And that—" He forced himself to look again at Doris. "That's my wife."

"How about it, Doc?" Hamill asked the man on the floor. "She dead?"

"No doubt of that." He was matter-of-fact. "Offhand, I'd say a blow on the head with a heavy object."

"Okay, boys, you know what to do," Hamill told the others. "Is there some place we can talk, Mr. Crawford?"

"There's a den."

"What about me?" the driver protested. "I've got to get back on the street. I'm losing a night's work."

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"Yeah? What's your part in this?"

"I brought the man home. I was with him when he found the body. I'm the one who called to report the crime."

"I haven't paid your fare," Frank remembered. "I was going to get it from—" He looked at the handbag that lay a few feet from Doris' hand and his voice died away.

"Send a bill," Hamill snapped. "Clancy, get the cabbie's story and let him go. All right, Mr. Crawford, take me to the den."

The smaller room showed signs of disarray. Desk drawers were partly open, a cabinet door swung loose. Nothing obvious, just enough to suggest that a search had been made.

"You keep any cash or valuables in here?" Hamill asked.

"No, I—oh!" A delayed memory struck him.

"Yeah? You notice something missing?"

"Not in here. But I just realized, when I found my wife, I—I took her hand—her left hand—and it was bare."

"Bare?"

"No rings. She always wore a big diamond. Almost a carat." Brill's man, he thought, had helped himself to a nice bonus. It was worth it, though, to add credibility.

"I see. Later I'd like you to go through the house and make an inventory of your losses. But first I want to get a sequence of events. When did you last see your wife?"

"About seven thirty this evening." He sat down, clasped his hands to stop their trembling. "A friend of hers picked her up to take her to a lecture."

"You know the friend's name and address?"

As he asked the question, the man he'd called Clancy entered unobtrusively and flipped open a small notebook.

"Mrs. George Farrell." Frank watched Clancy write it down. "She lives on Maple Drive. I'm not sure of the number."

"We can find her. After they left what did you do?"

"I had dinner with a friend."

"His name and address?"

"Actually, it was a woman."

"Oh?"

"Inge Ericson. 1421 Grant Street."

Again Clancy's pen moved. He and Hamill exchanged glances.

"I might as well tell you the truth, Lieutenant." Frank did not try to hide his embarrassment. "Inge and I were more than just friends. We've been having—well, I guess you'd call it an affair.

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But it's over. That's why I went to see her tonight—to break it off."

"Yeah?" the lieutenant's tone was neutral, showing neither belief nor doubt. "How come?"

"To be honest, my wife and I have been through some bad times. I wasn't the best of husbands—you'll hear that from a lot of people. But lately we've made an effort and it was starting to work. We planned to go on a cruise, a sort of second honeymoon. Doris was really looking forward to that. And now—now she'll never—" He broke off, covered his eyes with his hand, and held the post for several seconds. Then he straightened and made a brave attempt to smile. "Sorry," he said. "Anyway, that's what I had to tell Inge."

"I see." Skepticism broke through. "What you're telling me, Mr. Crawford, is that at the time of your wife's murder you were in your girl friend's apartment saying goodbye forever. I assume that Miss—Ericson, is it?—will tell the same story."

"We didn't stay in her apartment." Frank felt a secret pleasure at the way the detective had swallowed his bait. "Inge's got a temper, and I figured she'd take the news better if there were other people around. So we went to a restaurant near where she lives. La Paloma." Got that, Clancy? he wanted to add.

"And then?"

"We had something to eat, watched the floor show, and I told her what I'd come to say."

"How'd she react?"

"She blew up a little and I took her home."

"How long did you stay in her apartment?"

"I didn't go in. She was still sore and there was nothing more to talk about, so I came home."

"Don't you have a car, Mr. Crawford?"

"Lord, yes, I almost forgot that part. I drove to Inge's but La Paloma is in walking distance. Then when I tried to start my car, I found I had a dead battery. It's still parked there."

"How'd you get the cab?"

"I phoned from a drugstore at the corner of 15th and Stevens. When we got here all I had was a bill too big for him to change. That's why he came into the house with me. I was going to get some money from Doris, but instead—" Again he gave way to emotion, hiding his face.

"That jibe with the hacker's story?" Hamill asked Clancy.

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"Yeah. His sheet shows a pickup at ten thirty-five and we got the call at eleven twenty-seven."

"That fits. Get somebody to interview Mrs. Farrell, find out when she brought Mrs. Crawford home, what she saw and heard. Also check the restaurant, the drugstore, and the Ericson girl."

"Will do."

Clancy left. Hamill waited for Frank to recover. When he looked up, the detective's eyes were more sympathetic.

"I know this is a bad time for you, Mr. Crawford, but you've given us a straight story. I'm sure you understand that in a murder case, everything has to be doublechecked."

"You have your job to do." He matched the other's courtesy. "I'll do anything I can to help catch my wife's killer."

"We'll get him," Hamill promised. "The routine's going on while I talk to you."

As if in proof one of his subordinates came to the door. "The doc's finished," he reported. "Okay to take the body away?"

"Got enough pictures?"

"From every angle."

"Okay, let the morgue have her. What else do you know?"

"There are signs of forced entry by the back door. A couple of the neighbors say they heard a sound like a motorcycle being gunned around ten p.m."

Coincidence, Frank wondered, or part of the special Brill service?

The younger man left and Hamill turned back to Frank, his manner distinctly more friendly.

"We're getting a pattern," he said. "Maybe you've heard of a string of recent housebreakings?"

"The taxi driver said something about a—was it a Bike Bandit?"

"That's what the newspapers call him. He picks houses with no lights and no television playing and the occupants out for the evening. He steals small things, like money and jewelry, that he can carry on his motorcycle."

"Like my wife's ring."

"Exactly. Let's look around and see what else is missing."

With Hamill behind him Frank went upstairs and into Doris' bedroom. Like the den it gave the impression of a fast search. A jewel box lay open, its contents dumped in the middle of the bed.

"It's mostly costume jewelry," Frank said. "But she had a couple

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of good pieces—an amber necklace and a bracelet of heavy gold." He poked among the scattered articles. "They're not here."

"So he took the good stuff and left the junk. He knows values."

Continuing the inspection, Frank found that a pair of gold cufflinks had been taken from his bureau. That appeared to be the extent of the burglar's haul. They were in his bedroom when the phone rang. It was for Lieutenant Hamill. He listened for a long time, responding with grunts and short exclamations that apparently expressed satisfaction with what he heard.

"That about covers it," he concluded, "except for Ericson. Get her story and we'll have the whole package. I'll be here for another hour or so." He put down the phone "Your account is fully corroborated," he told Frank. "The restaurant owner, the waiter, even the guitar player—they all remember you. Your girl friend must have made quite a row."

"She was pretty mad," he agreed.

"The druggist remembers you too. And of course the cab company has a record of your call."

"Has someone talked to Mrs. Farrell?"

"Yes, she said the lecture ended about nine thirty and she drove your wife right home. The house was dark and everything looked normal."

"That's not much help."

"No, but at least the timing puts you in the clear. If you'll excuse me, I'll get on with my job. We have to go over the whole house for prints, et cetera. The fellow didn't leave any evidence in the other places, but sometimes they get careless and we get lucky. If you want to go to bed—"

"Thank you, no. I couldn't sleep. But I'll stay out of your way."

Frank remained upstairs while the lieutenant rejoined his associates. You're in the clear. In the clear. Hamill's words echoed soothingly in his brain. The tension that had carried him through the evening gave way to euphoria. His alibi was watertight and he was in the clear. Free of Doris. Free of suspicion. $2000 plus a diamond ring, an amber necklace, a gold bracelet, a pair of gold cuff links. He couldn't ask for a better bargain.

He was standing by the window gazing into the dark but contemplating a bright future when Hamill returned. Clancy was with him.

"You've found some evidence?" Frank asked them.

"Not here," Hamill answered. "But something else has come up.

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Tell me, Mr. Crawford, why did you go all the way to the drugstore to call a cab? Why didn't you use your girl-friend's phone?"

"We'd had a pretty heavy argument, you know about that. I didn't want to go back to her apartment."

"I'm sure you didn't. The druggist said you seemed very nervous, spilled coffee all over his counter."

"I suppose I was a little on edge. First the quarrel with Inge, then a dead battery."

"The cabdriver called you restless and fidgety."

"I may have been. What are you getting at, Lieutenant? What has all this to do with the murder of my wife?"

"With your wife? Not a thing. You know I sent a man to talk to Miss Ericson?"

"I heard you give the order."

"She didn't answer the doorbell and he couldn't get her on the phone. That worried him. Sometimes when a guy dumps a girl, she gets despondent, takes too many pills, or turns on the gas."

"Are you telling me that something's happened to Inge—"

"I think you know the answer to that as well as I do," Hamill snapped. "When they went in, they found her on the floor. The weapon, a heavy brass bookend, was lying by her side."

"Was she—is she—?"

"She's dead, Crawford."

"Oh, no! No, that can't be—"

"She yelled at you in the restaurant," Hamill said. "She made threats. A dozen or more people heard her. When you were back in her apartment, the fight got hotter. She wasn't willing to be dropped, maybe she had blackmail material. So you picked up the bookend, and crushed her skull. Is that how it happened?"

"No! No, you're wrong. I wasn't in her apartment. I only got as far as the door. She slammed it in my face." He paused, remembering how it had been. Himself on the outside, Inge going alone into the dark house. "He must have already been there. The Bike Bandit. He went in while we were at the restaurant. She caught him robbing the place and he—he killed her."

"That's what we were meant to think," Hamill agreed. "Somebody did a good job of imitating the Biker's m.o. It might even have worked if the Bike Bandit hadn't gone out on his own tonight. But we know he was here in your house at ten o'clock. And a man can't be in two places at once, can he, Mr. Crawford?"

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a NEW Interpol story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Sebastian Blue and Laura Charme investigate international gambling on a cruise ship in the Mediterranean. But possible crooked gambling was only the beginning—there were other, and bigger, crimes committed aboard the Messina Star . . .

INTERPOL: THE CASE OF THE FIVE COFFINS

by EDWARD D. HOCH

Eric Bohn was a man who knew cruise ships better than he knew the back yard of his own home in Wales, probably because he spent more weeks of each year aboard cruise ships than he did at home. His specialty was the type of ship that offered gambling on the high seas—either the official gambling of roulette wheels and dice cages in the promenade-deck sports room, or the unofficial sort with high-stakes poker and bridge games in the forward card room.

A ship like the *Messina Star,* cruising the Mediterranean off the cost of Spain, was the perfect sort for Eric Bohn, since it combined the best of both worlds. There were casino-type games with low house limits to amuse the tourists, presided over by provocatively clad roulette and dice girls, and high-stakes private card games for the professional gamblers. In three days Eric Bohn had managed to net close to £5000.

He was a little man with thin hair and a way of cocking his head to one side while listening to someone speak. It gave the impression his hearing might be impaired but in truth his hearing was very good. Eric Bohn never missed anything that happened around him. That was how he came to notice Claude Jennings, who operated the gambling concession on board the ship and supervised the two roulette girls and four dice and blackjack girls.

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At first Bohn thought very little about the man except to wonder how much the house was clearing at the tables. But on the third day out, as the *Messina Star* was cruising in sight of the Spanish coastline, he decided to follow Jennings and see just what he did on the ship when he left the game room. Perhaps, Bohn thought, Jennings might lead him to a really high-stakes game in one of the staterooms.

So he kept his eye on Jennings that evening at the gaming tables, watching him as he mingled with society matrons and overweight bankers. Many of the passengers were widows or retired couples, though there was a pair of honeymooners from Scotland and a middle-aged man who seemed friendly with one of the roulette girls. Bohn watched them all, making his bets in the casual manner of one who didn't much care whether he won or lost.

At exactly one o'clock Claude Jennings left the tables and hurried along the enclosed promenade to the elevators. It seemed too early for bedtime, and Bohn wondered if he was on his way to a big game. There was nothing above them but the sun deck, so he knew Jennings would be heading down. Bohn took the stairs, keeping his eye on the elevator indicator at each floor. The descending Jennings bypassed the veranda deck, the upper deck, and the main deck, but the elevator paused at A deck. Bohn reached the corridor just in time to see a door closing in the forward part of the ship, near the baggage rooms.

He waited outside the door for several minutes, hearing nothing. Finally he took a chance and tried the knob. The door opened, revealing a lighted compartment used for some sort of storage. There were long boxes draped with canvas and he wondered what they were. He lifted the end of one canvas and saw the polished wood and brass fittings of a coffin.

He looked beneath the other coverings and found the same thing. There were five coffins in the little storeroom.

And no sign of Claude Jennings.

He tried one of the lids and found it was open. The coffin was empty, and there was no sign that its white satin interior had ever been disturbed. He opened the second coffin and found the same thing. And the third.

He opened the fourth coffin.

The knife came up so fast he barely saw it, barely felt the slashing blow to his throat until it was too late. The last question

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in his mind was why anyone would want to kill him like this.

Sebastian Blue had never been a good sailor.

Even though the *Messina Star* was equipped with the latest gyro-fin stabilizers to minimize rolling and a bulbous bow to reduce pitching, the relatively calm journey through the Mediterranean waters had already given him a queasy stomach. He'd spent most of that third night in his cabin on the upper deck, not even able to check on Laura Charme's operation of the roulette wheel.

Interpol had been investigating crooked gambling aboard cruise ships for the better part of two years, and when Sebastian's airline crime division was expanded to include all modes of international travel, it seemed a likely area for their investigations. Sebastian and Laura had stumbled on a scheme in London last year in which young women were being recruited to operate rigged gambling games aboard ship. Laura had managed to get herself accepted for the position of roulette girl on the *Messina Star's* Mediterranean cruise, and Sebastian had signed on as a passenger.

For anyone who questioned his presence, he told the truth—that he was a lonely divorced male in his mid-fifties trying to strike up new acquaintances. He omitted only the fact that he was a former Scotland Yard inspector now employed by the International Police Organization in Paris, and that the new acquaintances were gamblers and confidence men who preyed on unsuspecting travelers.

Once that night, shortly before one o'clock, he wondered about Laura and how she was doing at the roulette wheel. His stomach was better and he even considered getting dressed and going up to the game room. But then he was drifting back into sleep, deciding Laura could take care of herself, when he was awakened by a knocking on the door of his stateroom.

"Who's there?"

"Captain Archibald, Mr. Blue. It's an urgent matter, I'm afraid."

The captain of the *Messina Star* was the only person on board who knew the identities of Sebastian and Laura. "Has anything happened to her?" he asked as he opened the door.

"Her? Oh, you mean Miss Charme. No, no, this is another matter. A man has been murdered on board. His throat has been cut. I thought you might lend a hand since there's no other law en-

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forcement official with us on this run."

Sebastian showed some reluctance. "That's hardly an Interpol matter. I'd only be exposing my identity in helping you."

Captain Archibald removed his peaked cap and ran a hand through graying hair. "To tell you the truth I need some advice. Of course it's not the first death I've had on board a ship under my command. You get used to these things—especially on pleasure cruises where you're carrying a great many older retired folks. And sometimes we bury them at sea, you know, with the next of kin's permission."

"That's out of the question in this case, certainly," Sebastian said.

"I know. And we do carry some coffins on board for situations where the body is kept. But my problem is this—We have no facilities for refrigerating a corpse for the remainder of the voyage. We must put in at a port and turn over the body to the authorities."

"Then do it, man!"

"Right now we're sailing in Spanish coastal waters, but another few hours will bring us into French waters. With your Interpol connection, wouldn't a landing in France be preferable to one in Spain?"

"Aren't you due in Villefranche tomorrow?"

"Yes, shortly after noon."

"Then continue on course. I'll help you with the authorities there."

"And will you come to view the body now?"

Sebastian sighed. There'd be no sleep for a while, but at least his stomach was better.

So five minutes later, after dressing, he descended with Captain Archibald to a narrow corridor on A deck, in the forward portion reserved for the storage of baggage. The ship's doctor and the purser were bending over the body in the corridor, and someone had brought a canvas sheet to cover it.

"Have you identified him?" Sebastian asked, trying for a view of the dead man's face.

"Chap named Eric Bohn. British subject."

"Bohn—of course!"

"You knew him, Mr. Blue?"

"Only by reputation, but I saw him come aboard. He was one of several passengers who interested me."

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The captain gazed unhappily at the trail of blood leading from the body. "And what was his reputation?"

"He was a professional gambler, operating mainly on ships like this, separating the tourists from their money."

"Part of the ring you're investigating?"

Sebastian glanced around and lowered his voice. "I'm mainly interested in the people operating rigged games on your ship. A man like Bohn was out for himself, playing against both the house and the other players. It's possible he was killed because he was interfering with their operations, trying to cut himself in."

Captain Archibald was not a man to accept such happenings on his ship. "Do whatever you can to bring these people to justice, Mr. Blue. I'll give you whatever authority is necessary to carry on your investigation."

Sebastian's eyes had followed the trail of blood back from the body toward one of the storeroom doors. "What's in there?" he asked.

"I'm not sure myself. Let's take a look."

The purser cleared his throat. "It's the coffin storage room, sir."

"Thank you, Mr. Kelly. I had forgotten." He opened the door and snapped on the light. Sebastian saw a small room filled with oblong shapes. "We carry five coffins. That's the usual number for most cruise ships of this size. You'll get an occasional burial at sea but in most cases they want the remains sent back home."

Sebastian bent to examine some blood on the floor. "Would Bohn have had any reason to enter this room?"

"Certainly not."

"It looks very much as if he was killed here and then dragged outside. See here—an attempt was made to wipe up the blood."

Captain Archibald turned to the purser. "Mr. Kelly, uncover these coffins and open them, please."

Kelly pulled off the tarps and opened the lid of each coffin. All had white satin interiors unmarked by blood. All were empty. "Nothing here, sir," the purser reported.

"Interesting," Sebastian said. He glanced at his watch and saw it was two o'clock. Laura would be coming off duty.

She gave the wheel a final spin and stepped back. Lane Munday, the girl who relieved her at two, squeezed between a pair of big bettors and joined her behind the table. "How's the crowd, Laura?" she whispered.

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A chorus of groans went up as the white ball settled into number 31. "Betting is good but beginning to thin out," Laura answered, raking in the losers' chips and paying off a couple of bets on black. "Watch out for the bald one. He's a pincher."

"I'm used to it," Lane said. The short satin skirts worn by the roulette girls left a good expanse of leg exposed. For some passengers it was too great a temptation, especially after a few drinks. Laura Charme had never quite learned to handle situations like that without seeming rude, and she secretly admired Lane's cool composure. Laura had enough trouble with her costume as it was. The roulette girls wore a waist sash with a tassel on it, and her tassel had just been pulled off for the second time since the voyage began.

"Mr. Jennings thinks we should shut down at four," Laura said, picking up her purse. "I'm going to bed. I'm bushed!"

Lane Munday gave her a wave. "See you tomorrow."

As Laura headed toward the elevators she smiled to herself, remembering how Lane had come upon her the first night out while she was deep in conversation with Sebastian. She'd been worried at first, but the younger girl simply assumed that Laura had found a wealthy passenger with whom to pass the time. "What we don't take away from them at the wheels we can always get after hours, on our own," she told Laura. "Good luck to you."

Now Laura wondered if she should stop at Sebastian's cabin with a report. Nothing much had happened that night, except that Mrs. Carstairs claimed someone had stolen a bracelet from her stateroom. Kelly, the purser, had investigated and she'd heard him telling Lane later that this sort of thing happened on every trip. "It'll turn up," he predicted. "Unless, of course, she used it to pay off a gambling debt. We've had that happen too, believe me. These old ladies gamble their jewelry away and then report them stolen so they can collect from the insurance company."

Laura liked Kelly, what little she'd seen of him. He mingled easily with the roulette and dice girls, and took a cynical view of life that reflected her own in many things. She supposed his real job was keeping an eye on Claude Jennings and his girls, making certain the ship's owners received their proper share from the gambling, but he went about it in such a pleasant manner that even Jennings himself offered no objections. She found Kelly a welcome relief from the formal stuffiness of Captain Archibald.

As she waited for the elevator the doors slid open and Sebastian

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Blue stepped out. "I was thinking of stopping by your cabin," she said.

"The captain already did. He got me out of bed to investigate a murder."

"A murder!"

"Eric Bohn, that gambler I pointed out to you. Someone cut his throat."

"My God!"

"The captain decided it was a job for Interpol."

"Then your cover is blown."

"Well, the purser—Kelly—knows who I am. And the ship's doctor was there too. I imagine the word will travel quickly."

She remembered Lane Munday. "That girl on my table—I'd better tell her before she hears it elsewhere. Otherwise my value to this operation will be nil."

"Go ahead. We'd better stay clear of each other for a time."

"What about the body?"

"We dock at Villefranche tomorrow." He remembered the time. "Well, this afternoon, really. They plan to contact the local authorities and put the body ashore there."

"The ship will be swarming with police. If Jennings is trying anything crooked, he'll surely lay low now."

"Nothing yet?"

"Nothing. Oh, Lane and the other girls get what they can from the rich old men, but that's strictly a private affair. Jennings seems to be letting the house odds do the winning for him."

"Perhaps we misjudged him," Sebastian said. "We'll see. You'd better get some sleep now."

In the morning Sebastian rose early, making his way to the purser's office down the corridor from his stateroom on the upper deck. Mrs. Carstairs, the woman who had lost the jewelry, was filling out a report for Kelly. It was the first Sebastian had heard of the theft, and he listened with interest. The woman was tall and angular, with the look of a dowager and the blue-white hair that went with it.

"I'd worn the diamond bracelet while I was gambling the night before," she explained to Kelly. "Everyone saw it on my wrist. And when I was foolish enough not to wear it last night, they must have known it was in my stateroom."

"We maintain strongboxes for valuables," Kelly pointed out. "It

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should have been left with me." He was the sort who went by the rulebook and expected others to do the same. Sebastian could see he had little sympathy for Mrs. Carstairs and her missing bracelet.

"Well, it wasn't," she said. "And now I want to know what you intend to do about it."

"Do?"

"Will you search the ship?"

"That would be an impossibly large task."

"You'll certainly search the passengers before they're allowed to leave."

"Customs is quite thorough, Mrs. Carstairs. I'm sure that anyone foolish enough to try would be detected trying to smuggle the bracelet off the ship."

"But what about these stops along the way? These shore tours? What if someone carried my bracelet off this very afternoon and sold it on shore?"

"I doubt if a fence would be all that accommodating." He turned to Sebastian. "Don't you agree, Mr. Blue?"

"Not completely," Sebastian replied, and saw the purser's face fall. "Villefranche is right on the border of Monaco. Anywhere you have casino gambling you're likely to find a vigorous trade in jewelry and other pawnable items. I'm sure someone needing cash for the gaming tables of Monte Carlo could dispose of Mrs. Carstairs' bracelet in thirty minutes—at a fraction of its true value, of course."

"You see!" She turned on Kelly with renewed vigor. "You simply must search the passengers going ashore at Villefranche."

"That would be impossible," the purser said, turning in his chair to bring the conversation to an end.

Mrs. Carstairs stormed out, muttering dark threats about seeing the captain, and Sebastian gave a sigh of sympathy. "I understand your problems in this job, Mr. Kelly, but I didn't feel I could lie to the woman."

"We have a murder on board and she's worried about her damned bracelet!"

"I'm sure she doesn't know about the murder. Captain Archibald has taken pains to keep it quiet."

"Nevertheless, she's raising more fuss than it's worth. A woman on A deck lost a necklace and she just reported it and that was the end of it."

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"A necklace too? Interesting."

"Interesting in what way?"

"Do we have a jewel thief on board the *Messina Star* too, in addition to our murderer?"

At the first opportunity that day Laura Charme sought out Lane Munday on the sun deck where the roulette girls and some of the younger passengers liked to relax while getting a tan. Lane rolled over on her stomach as Laura spoke and lifted the big round sunglasses to her forehead. "Interpol? He's with Interpol?"

"That's what I hear," Laura said. "Can you imagine that? And I thought he had a little money!"

"You'd better get right downstairs and tell Claude," the girl said. "He'll want to know."

"Why would Claude be concerned?" Laura asked innocently.

"Because Interpol interests itself in things like international gambling. Why else would this Sebastian Blue be on board?"

"Perhaps he's merely on vacation."

"Fat chance! You go tell Claude."

Laura decided it might be the wisest course. And it would give her an opportunity to see his reaction. She found Jennings driving golf balls into a net on the promenade deck and went up to him. "Mr. Jennings?"

He put down his club and smiled at her. "Yeah? You're Laura, aren't you? The girl who works with Lane on the roulette wheel?"

"That's me."

"I been meaning to talk with you before now. You're doing a fine job. Keep up the good work."

"Something's come up, Mr. Jennings."

"What's the trouble?"

"There's a man on board I've been seeing. Sebastian Blue is his name."

"What about him?"

"I just found out he's working for Interpol."

Claude Jennings shifted his eyes to meet hers. "Oh, is he? You know, I've never really met one of them. You should introduce us."

"Lane said I should tell you. She was worried."

"Nothing to worry about. Not the slightest bother. Our hands are clean." He reached out and patted her shoulder as he said it, and she had to resist the urge to draw back in alarm.

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Sebastian was standing at the rail as the big liner edged its way into the dock at Villefranche. He could see three grim-faced police officials waiting to board, and he knew it was going to be a long afternoon.

He was right.

As the Interpol official on board he was expected to have matters fully under control, yet the French officials were the first to agree that Interpol had absolutely no jurisdiction in the case. At times as the day wore on he was questioned as closely as a suspect might have been, and he began to wonder if they thought Interpol capable of employing paid assassins when all else failed.

"You admit an interest in this man Bohn," the inspector in charge said. His name was Vernir and he seemed pleased at this break in the daily routine.

"I observed him come aboard," Sebastian admitted. "He's a known gambler."

"Are there any other gamblers on board?"

"A man named Claude Jennings has the gambling concession on the ship. He hires the roulette and dice girls and oversees the operation, with a percentage going to the ship's owners."

"And Interpol's interest in all this?" Vernir asked.

"Only to keep it honest. Jennings has a reputation for running a crooked game, at least on dry land."

Vernir questioned him further, but Sebastian made a point of not revealing Laura's identity to the man. Jennings would already be suspicious of her friendship with Sebastian, and she didn't need any more trouble at the moment.

Claude Jennings watched the sway of Laura's hips as she walked away from him. Then he reached over and retrieved his golf club. A charming girl, no doubt about it. He could make good use of her in the organization—something more demanding than a mere roulette girl in a short skirt.

If he could be certain she wasn't an Interpol agent.

The news she'd brought him regarding Sebastian Blue was hardly a surprise. He'd known from the moment Blue stepped on board that he was an Interpol agent. The man had been pointed out to him once in a Paris café, and Claude Jennings never forgot a face. Blue was a Scotland Yard inspector who'd retired and gone to work for Interpol. Something about marriage difficulties back home.

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And of course Jennings had observed his growing friendship with Laura. It was possible she was an Interpol agent too, though he thought it more likely that Blue was trying to get to the organization through her. The murder of that man Bohn had brought Blue into the open and it was difficult to predict what he would do next.

Jennings took a few more swings with the golf club, enjoying the clear air of the harbor, and then decided he really should go ashore. On the port side of the vessel he could see the coffin containing the murdered man's remains being carried off the ship. The passengers must all know about it by now, of course. It would be something to remember of their trip.

The *Messina Star* remained in port overnight while buses transported the passengers to the Monte Carlo casinos and the night life of Cannes. Knowing he was being watched, Jennings made a point of avoiding the casino trip because he knew too many people there. He went instead to a little restaurant near the harbor area and dined alone before returning to the ship.

The gaming tables were closed down while the *Messina Star* was in port, but he knew most of the girls would be lounging by the ship's pool. It was a warm evening, perfect for a relaxing swim. He didn't see Laura at first, but Lane Munday was by the pool's edge, dangling her long legs into the water.

"Hello, Lane."

"Mr. Jennings—I thought you'd gone ashore."

"Just for dinner. It's no holiday for me to go off to Monte Carlo." Her formality in using his last name amused him, since they'd been on a first-name basis back in London. Still, he realized she was doing it for the benefit of the other girls within earshot.

"Did Laura speak to you?" she asked.

"About Mr. Blue? Yes."

"Should we be worried?"

"Oh, I don't think so. Our hands are clean."

"Captain Archibald was here a while ago, looking for you."

Jennings pursed his lips. "What for?"

"He didn't say."

"All right. I'll go find him." As he turned to leave he saw Laura emerge from the pool. He wondered if she'd been close enough to overhear their conversation, but then decided it didn't really matter. He waved to her and went off to find Captain Archibald.

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The captain was going over some tidal charts in his office when Jennings knocked and entered. "Good of you to come," he said, glancing up. "I was asking about for you."

Jennings sat down and took out a cigarette. "What can I do for you?"

Captain Archibald put aside his charts. "I've been in radio contact with the home office in London. This whole business is very distressing to them—first an Interpol investigation of gambling on board, then the murder of a known gambling figure."

"You knew of the Interpol investigation?"

"Yes."

"I wish you'd warned me."

"It was not my place to warn you. I assumed you had nothing to fear from such an investigation."

"Nor do I."

"Did you know the dead man?"

"Not at all."

Captain Archibald sighed and leaned back. "I hope you realize that I have no reason to doubt your word. Anything that happens will be London's decision."

"What's going to happen?"

"There's some talk of terminating your gambling concession on board the *Messina Star.*"

"Terminating! They can't do that—I have a contract!"

"A contract with a termination clause," the captain reminded him. "Termination for cause. Even if your games are perfectly legal and above reproach, London feels they are attracting an unsavory element to the ship."

"Unsavory!"

"Eric Bohn seems to have fitted the description. And certainly his murderer fits it as well. My purser, Kelly, reports there have been a number of thefts from staterooms too—jewelry and valuables. More so than usual. The message is not lost on London, Mr. Jennings. An unsavory element."

"But—"

"We do have the ship's reputation to consider, you know."

"When might this termination take effect?"

"At the conclusion of the voyage, I expect."

Claude Jennings got to his feet. "Thank you for telling me," he said with effort. Then he turned and left the room.

The *Messina Star* sailed the following morning, staying close to

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the coastline as it headed for its next port. That night Jennings reopened the gaming tables. He checked out the girls' uniforms, chiding Laura about a missing tassel, and had her help him while they dusted off the tables and counted the chips. He didn't mention the captain's threat to terminate the concession.

He waited till the games were under way, watching Laura give the wheel its first spin of the evening. As he was about to step out on deck, one of the women passengers accosted him. "You're Mr. Jennings, aren't you?" she asked. "I'm Mrs. Carstairs."

"Yes?" He'd seen her at the wheel several times, and he was always polite to good customers. "What can I do for you?"

"I've had some jewelry stolen—a bracelet and some rings too, I think. I've reported it to the purser, but he's given me very little satisfaction. One gentleman suggested jewelry is often pawned to pay gambling debts, and it occured to me that the thief might approach you with it."

"I hardly think so, Mrs. Carstairs."

"But they couldn't risk taking it off the ship themselves!"

"If anyone approaches me with jewelry, you can be assured I'll notify the purser at once."

She hesitated, unwilling to let him pass. "Well, all right."

Jennings smiled and managed to slip by her. God, he was in enough trouble without worrying about stolen jewelry! In two weeks the *Messina Star* would dock in London and his gambling franchise would be ended.

He wondered about that as he went down to his cabin on the main deck. Maybe somebody was trying to get rid of him—killing Bohn and stealing jewelry for the sole purpose of discrediting him and gaining control of the gambling franchise.

No, he decided. If that was the motive, wouldn't it be easier just to kill him?

He was unlocking the door of his stateroom when he heard a step behind him. He turned, startled. "You gave me a start, coming up behind me like that. What do you—?"

The knife came up almost before he saw it, before he had a chance to wonder if this was how Eric Bohn had died too.

It was Laura who found the body, not more than five minutes later, as she came downstairs on her break. Jennings was sprawled on the floor inside his stateroom, but his right foot had kept the door from closing all the way. She bent to feel for a

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pulse, already knowing from the horribly gashed throat that there would be none. She remembered wondering two things—why anyone would want to kill Claude Jennings and why the murderer hadn't simply moved his leg so the door could be closed and the body hidden for a time.

She stepped to the telephone, handling it gingerly to avoid fingerprints, and dialed Sebastian's stateroom. He answered on the second ring. "Yes?"

"Sebastian—thank God you're there! Claude Jennings has been murdered. I'm in his stateroom on the main deck."

"What number?"

"M-84."

"I'll be right down. Does anyone else know?"

"Only the killer."

"Stay there," he said, and hung up.

He appeared in less than two minutes, breathing hard. "Is it the same as the other one?" she asked, trying not to look at the body.

"The wound seems similar. You found him like this, with the door ajar?"

"Yes."

"When did you last see him alive?"

"Not a half hour ago. I helped him set everything up and then started the wheel. I saw him having a brief conversation with that Mrs. Carstairs. Then he went out on deck. A minute or two later Lane relieved me and I went on my break. I passed here on the way to my cabin and found him."

"He hasn't been dead more than ten minutes or so. You must have just missed the killer."

"Should we call the captain?"

"I will, but I want you out of here first. I don't want him confusing things by suspecting you of killing Jennings."

"Me!"

Sebastian smiled at her expression. "You'd just started the evening shift at the wheel. Why would you take a break so soon except to follow Jennings down here and kill him?"

"But—"

"That's what they'd think, Laura, if you're found here."

"I told you I'd been helping Jennings set up the games—counting out chips and dusting off the tables. Remember, we were closed down in port last night. I worked three hours straight and I

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was damned happy to get a half-hour break." But she could see his point, as always. "You're right. I'd better go."

Sebastian spied something by the body and scooped it up. "You lost your belt tassel again. That's known as a clue in this business, and we don't want it found here."

"Thanks." She slipped it into her purse. "I'll see you later."

Then she hurried on to her cabin, trying to sort out the events in her mind. There was something about the murder of Claude Jennings that didn't make sense to her. She knew he'd been wandering around Villefranche alone the previous night. Why hadn't the killer struck then, when the crime might have been blamed on a local mugging? Why wait till he was back on board the ship, out at sea, before striking? Was the killer otherwise occupied last night? Or did the motive not arise until tonight?

She went into her stateroom and washed her face, thinking it might be just as well if she delayed returning to the game room for a few minutes, until after the news had spread.

Ten minutes later, as she was about to leave, there was a knock on the door. It was Lane Munday, wide-eyed and out of breath. "Let me in, Laura. Something's happened!"

"Did you leave the wheel unattended?"

Lane ignored the question. "Claude Jennings is dead! Someone killed him!"

Laura sat down on the bed, acting stunned at the news. "Who could have done it—the same person who killed the other man?"

"I guess so," Lane answered with a shrug. "But where does it leave us? Are we out of a job?"

"I suppose. We worked for Jennings."

"God, Laura, I don't know where I'll find another job. I hate the thought of going back to an office in London."

"Maybe we should concern ourselves a bit more with Jennings. He won't be going back to London ever!"

"I didn't mean to sound heartless, Laura. It's just that—"

Laura opened her purse and saw the tassel from her belt. She crossed to the dressing table to drop it in the drawer and then she froze. Lane Munday was still talking behind her but Laura had stopped listening. She was staring down at the open drawer, seeing her tassel already in it, remembering how it had come off the other day.

The tassel in her hand, the one on the scene of the crime, had to have come from the only other costume exactly like hers.

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"What is it?" Lane asked as Laura turned toward her. Then her eyes went to the two tassels and her hand felt for the sash around her waist.

"It's not there," Laura informed her. "It's here in my hand. You killed him, didn't you, Lane? You killed both of them."

The knife came out of Lane's sleeve and she flung herself at Laura.

Their struggle was brief. Laura's karate needed polishing, but it was good enough against someone like Lane. The girl went down hard, arching her back in pain as she hit the floor, just as Sebastian and Captain Archibald burst through the door.

"Are you all right?" Sebastian almost shouted. "I saw her come in and then suddenly the whole thing dawned on me."

"It dawned on me too," Laura said, holding out the two tassels. "This came off her sash, not mine."

Captain Archibald bent to assist the girl on the floor. "Would someone please explain this to me?"

Sebastian kicked the knife out of Lane's reach. "Will you do the honors, Laura, or shall I?"

"I only know that she killed both of them just before relieving me at the roulette table. That way, with a discrepancy of a few minutes in setting the time of death, she'd seem to have an alibi. She purposely left the door to Jennings' room open so I or someone else would find the body. She needed it found while she was safely at the roulette wheel. But I don't really know why she did it."

Sebastian bent down. "Want to tell us, Lane?"

The girl on the floor glared up at Laura. "She's Interpol too?"

"Yes."

"I should have known! Claude suspected her, but he wasn't sure."

"Why did you kill him? Were you fixing the wheel—gaffing it?"

"No." She got to her feet, still holding her back in pain. "It was something else."

Sebastian Blue nodded. "The stolen jewelry. I've realized right along that you girls were in the best position to notice who was wearing what. And you knew what had been left in the stateroom. You were stealing it, weren't you, Lane? Eric Bohn caught you with it, down there in the coffin room, so you killed him. Right?"

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She nodded. "I think he was following Claude, but somehow he missed him and cornered me in that room. I was hiding the stolen jewelry in the padded lining of one of the coffins. When I heard Bohn outside I hid in the coffin, but then he came in and started opening them. When he opened mine I slit his throat with the knife I'd brought to cut a slot in the lining for the jewelry. Then I dragged the body into the passageway so attention wouldn't be called to the coffins."

"Thereby calling even more attention to them," Sebastian said. "But why did Jennings have to die?"

She didn't answer at first. Instead she looked away, perhaps trying to think of a suitable answer. Finally she said, "When I realized they were using one of those coffins for Bohn's body, it occurred to me that was the perfect way to get the jewelry I'd stolen off the ship. I could go ashore and remove it from the coffin later, on land. Customs wouldn't do a very careful search of a coffin containing a freshly dead body."

"But the jewels weren't in Bohn's coffin?"

"No. It was one chance out of five, and the odds weren't good enough. And with the body inside it, I couldn't switch the jewels to the right coffin. But now you see there are only four coffins on board. The odds are getting better."

Laura stared at her, stunned and horrified. "You mean you killed Jennings simply to have another dead body? But what if they still hadn't used the right coffin?"

Lane merely smiled, looking from one to the other. "Then there would have only been three coffins left."

"Q"

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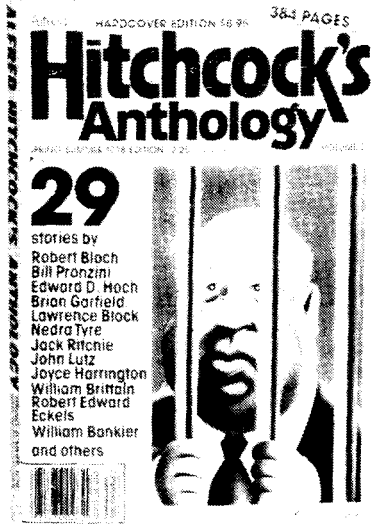

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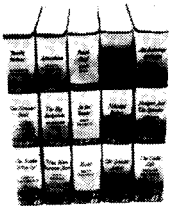

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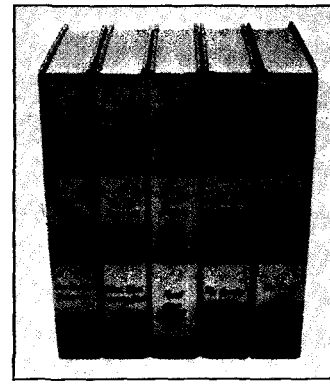

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